

18 Candles

Book One: Blue Raspberry

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Prologue

August, 1982

The Mitchell Mansion hummed with the lazy contentment of a late August afternoon that stretched on forever, the kind of day that existed in a world without obligations or schedules—the last precious days before kindergarten and fourth grade would begin. The grand Tudor estate in Grosse Pointe sat quiet and peaceful, its stately presence a testament to Dr. Graham Mitchell's success as a heart surgeon.

Inside, sunlight filtered through the living room curtains in golden ribbons, casting dancing patterns across the plush carpet where action figures lay scattered like fallen soldiers after some epic imaginary battle.

Five-year-old Ian Mitchell sat cross-legged on the couch, his small body practically vibrating with barely contained excitement. His chubby legs swung back and forth, not quite reaching the floor, and his dirty blonde hair stuck up in several directions despite his mother's attempts to tame it that morning. In his lap sat a bowl of popcorn that was almost as big as he was, though most of the kernels seemed to be finding their way onto the cushions rather than into his mouth.

On the opposite end of the couch, his nine-year-old brother Gavin lay sprawled in a tangle of limbs, completely zonked out and oblivious to the world around him. His mouth hung slightly open, soft snores punctuating the soundtrack of Superman's heroics. He'd worn himself out at baseball practice that morning and had crashed the moment they'd settled in to watch the movie—again.

Next to Ian, ten-year-old Derek Lawson sat with the casual confidence of someone who had recently discovered he was no longer quite a child but not yet ready to give up childish things entirely. His dark hair—nearly black—fell across his forehead, and his bright blue eyes tracked Superman's movements across the screen with the kind of focus that had made him a star on the youth football team. Even at ten, Derek was already bigger and stronger than most boys his age, his frame hinting at the athletic build that would make him a high school quarterback in a few years. He held the remote control like a scepter, having claimed the power to rewind the good parts—which, according to Ian, was essentially every scene where Superman appeared.

Derek was still fascinated by the VCR that Dr. Mitchell had brought home earlier that month. His own family could never afford something like that—hell, they could barely keep the lights on some months—and the magic of being able to rewind and replay scenes over and over felt like something out of science fiction. The fact that Graham Mitchell trusted him enough to let him operate it made Derek feel

grown-up and important in a way few things in his chaotic home life did.

"Again!" Ian had demanded approximately seven times in the past hour, his voice high and insistent. "Rewind it *again*! I wanna see Superman save Lois Lane *again*!"

Derek had obliged each time with the patient indulgence of an older brother, though technically they weren't related by blood. He'd been Gavin Mitchell's best friend since they were in kindergarten together, which meant he'd been a fixture in the Mitchell household—or mansion, as everyone in Grosse Pointe called it—for as long as Ian could remember. To Ian, Derek might as well have been family—or perhaps something even more special than that, though the five-year-old didn't have words for what he felt when Derek smiled at him or ruffled his hair or called him "*Lane*."

The nickname had started when Ian was barely three, when he'd first become obsessed with Superman. Derek, with his dark hair and striking blue eyes, had reminded the toddler so much of Christopher Reeve that Ian had started calling him "*Superman*" with all the earnest admiration a small child could muster. Derek had found it adorable and had responded by dubbing Ian "*Lane*"—short for Lois Lane, Superman's reporter love interest. What had started as a playful joke between a seven-year-old and a toddler had become something more meaningful over the years. Derek was always helping people, always strong and dependable, always there when anyone needed him—especially Ian. The nickname fit him perfectly.

"Okay, Lane, but this is the *last* time," Derek said, his voice carrying that mixture of amusement and affection that always made Ian's heart feel like it was expanding in his chest like a balloon. "Your mom's gonna think I've been torturing you with the same movie all afternoon."

"But I *love* this movie!" Ian protested, his green eyes wide and earnest. "And I love when Superman *flies*! He's so *cool*, Derek. He's the coolest person *ever*."

"He's pretty cool," Derek agreed, hitting the rewind button once more. The VCR made that distinctive mechanical whirring sound as the tape spooled backward, a sound that would forever be associated in Ian's memory with this perfect afternoon.

On the television screen, Christopher Reeve's Superman soared through the sky with arms outstretched, cape billowing behind him in a way that defied all physics but perfectly captured the essence of heroism itself. Ian watched with rapt attention, his mouth hanging slightly open, popcorn forgotten entirely.

"I wish I could fly," Ian whispered, his voice filled with longing. "If I could fly, I could go anywhere. I could be a hero too."

"You don't need to fly to be a hero, buddy," Derek said, and something in his voice made Ian look up at him. Derek's expression was soft, almost tender, in a way that made Ian's chest feel warm and tight. "Heroes come in *all* shapes and sizes."

"But Superman is the *best* hero," Ian insisted. "He saves *everybody*. He's strong and brave and he *never* gives up. He's perfect."

Derek chuckled, a sound that rumbled pleasantly and made Ian smile even though he wasn't entirely sure what was funny. "Nobody's perfect, Lane. Not even Superman."

"You're perfect," Ian said simply, the words tumbling out before he could think about them. His cheeks flushed pink immediately, but he didn't look away. "You're just like Superman. You're strong and brave, and you help my mom even when she doesn't ask, and you're always nice to me even when Gavin says I'm being annoying."

Something flickered across Derek's face—surprise, perhaps, or maybe something softer and more complicated. His ears turned slightly red, which Ian noticed because he always noticed everything about Derek.

"Well, uh... thanks, Ian," Derek managed, clearing his throat in a way that sounded almost grown-up. "But I'm really not—"

"You *are*!" Ian interrupted, turning his whole body toward Derek now, the popcorn bowl sliding forgotten onto the couch cushion beside him. "You're *my* Superman!"

The words hung in the air between them, and Ian felt like something important had just happened, though he couldn't have explained what. He only knew that when Derek was around, the world felt safer and brighter, like Superman had personally arranged for the sun to shine a little warmer.

They watched the rest of Superman 2 in companionable silence, though Ian noticed that Derek kept glancing at him with an expression the boy couldn't quite decipher. When the credits finally rolled and the triumphant music swelled, Ian felt something building in his chest, a feeling that if he didn't say something important right now, he might never get another chance.

"I gotta go potty," Ian announced suddenly, scrambling off the couch. "I'll be right back."

"Okay, buddy," Derek said, his attention already drifting back to the credits scrolling up the screen.

Ian padded quickly out of the living room and up the grand staircase, his little legs taking the steps two at a time. He burst into his bedroom—an explosion of toys and superhero posters and rumpled bedsheets—and made a beeline for his dresser. In the top drawer, tucked carefully beneath his Superman pajamas, was the Ring Pop he'd gotten at the grocery store with his mom that morning.

He'd picked blue raspberry specifically because blue was Derek's favorite color. Ian knew this the same way he knew that Derek liked grape soda better than orange, that he always ate the crusts off his sandwich first, and that he hummed when he was concentrating really hard on something.

Ian pulled out the Ring Pop, holding it up to the light filtering through his bedroom window. The blue candy sparkled like a real jewel. His heart started beating really fast, the way it did when he was about to do something scary but also really, really important.

Taking a deep breath, Ian clutched the Ring Pop to his chest and ran back downstairs.

Derek was still on the couch, now scrolling through the TV guide with mild interest. Gavin continued to snore softly on the other end, dead to the world. Ian climbed back onto the couch, his small body trembling slightly.

"Derek?" His voice came out smaller than he'd intended, almost a whisper.

"Yeah, buddy?" Derek looked down at him, that patient smile still on his face.

Ian's fingers trembled as he pulled the Ring Pop from behind his back. His heart was beating so hard he was sure Derek must be able to hear it.

"I..." Ian started, then stopped. But then he looked up at Derek—at his Superman—and the words came tumbling out in a rush. "I want to marry *you* one day."

The silence that followed felt enormous, filling the living room like an inflatable castle at a birthday party. Derek's eyes went wide, his mouth opening slightly in an expression of pure shock. His face flushed red, spreading from his neck all the way to the tips of his ears.

"Ian, I... what?" Derek's voice cracked slightly. "You *can't* just... I mean, we're *both*... I'm only *ten* and you're *five*, and we're both boys, and—"

"But I *love* you," Ian said, and suddenly his eyes were filling with tears—not sad tears, but the kind that came when feelings got too big to hold inside. "You're my Superman. Superman *always* marries Lois Lane in the end. That's how the story goes."

Derek looked around frantically, as if hoping an adult might suddenly appear to help him navigate this impossible situation. But Gavin was dead asleep on the other end of the couch, still snoring softly and completely oblivious, and Mrs. Mitchell was somewhere else in the mansion, blissfully unaware of the declaration being made in her living room.

"Ian, listen," Derek said, his voice gentle despite his obvious panic. He shifted on the couch to face the little boy more fully. "That's...

that's *really* sweet. But we can't tell people about this, okay? It has to be our secret."

Ian's face crumpled, his lower lip trembling. His small shoulders began to droop, the Ring Pop lowering slightly in his hand. "Why? Why can't we tell people?"

Derek's expression softened at the sight of Ian's disappointment. For all his ten-year-old embarrassment, he couldn't bear to see the kid genuinely upset. "It's *complicated*," he tried to explain, searching for words that a five-year-old might understand. "People might not... they might think it's weird. Not because of *you*!" he added quickly as Ian's eyes widened. "You're *great*, buddy. But we're *really* young, and... and you might change your mind when you grow up."

"I *won't* change my mind," Ian said fiercely, but his voice still wobbled. "I *know* I won't."

Derek studied the little boy's face for a long moment, seeing the absolute conviction there. Something in his chest tightened—whether from affection or discomfort or some confusing mixture of both, he couldn't quite say.

"Okay," Derek said finally, making a decision. "How about *this*? We can keep it a secret for *now*, just between *us*. And then, when you're all grown up and finished with high school, if you still feel the same way... then we can tell *everyone*. Deal?"

Ian's face transformed like sunrise breaking over the horizon, his smile so bright and beautiful that Derek felt momentarily dazed by it. "Really? You promise?"

"I promise," Derek said, not entirely sure what he was promising but unable to deny Ian anything when he looked at him like that.

With trembling fingers and a smile that threatened to split his face in two, Ian held out the Ring Pop. The blue candy caught the light, glinting with all the solemnity of a genuine proposal.

"Superman, will you please marry me when I'm done with high school, and then we can tell everyone?"

Derek looked at the Ring Pop, then at Ian's shining eyes, then back at the candy ring. Every instinct told him this was ridiculous, that he should laugh it off or explain more thoroughly why this couldn't happen. He was ten years old. Ian was five. They were both boys. This was impossible on approximately seventeen different levels.

But Ian was looking at him with such hope, such trust, that Derek found he couldn't bear to crush it entirely. And really, what was the harm? By the time Ian finished high school, he'd have forgotten all about this childish infatuation. He'd have grown up, discovered girls (or boys, Derek's mind supplied helpfully), and this would just be a funny story they'd laugh about someday.

"Okay, Lane," Derek said softly, his cheeks burning but his smile genuine. "Okay. I'll marry you when you finish high school."

The squeal of joy that erupted from Ian was probably audible three houses away. The little boy launched himself at Derek, the Ring Pop forgotten momentarily as small arms wrapped around Derek's neck in a hug so enthusiastic it nearly knocked them both off the couch.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Ian chanted, his face buried against Derek's shoulder. "I love you, Superman!"

Derek patted Ian's back awkwardly, his face now approximately the color of a fire truck. "Yeah, yeah, okay buddy. But remember—*secret*, right? Just between *us*."

Ian pulled back just enough to look Derek in the face, pressing a finger to his lips dramatically. "Secret," he agreed seriously. "Until I finish high school. Then we tell everyone."

"Right. Until you finish high school." Derek felt fairly confident that particular conversation would never actually need to happen.

Ian suddenly remembered the Ring Pop, grabbing it from where it had rolled onto the couch cushion. "Here!" He thrust it toward Derek again. "You have to wear it! That's how it works!"

Derek took the Ring Pop, examining the gaudy blue candy with an expression caught somewhere between amusement and resignation. "I don't think it's going to fit, Ian. My fingers are bigger than yours."

"Try!" Ian insisted, bouncing slightly on the couch cushions.

With a dramatic sigh that was mostly for show, Derek attempted to slide the Ring Pop onto his finger. It made it approximately halfway down before getting stuck on his knuckle. Ian giggled at the sight, and despite his embarrassment, Derek found himself laughing too.

"Okay, new plan," Derek said, wiggling the candy off his finger. "How about we share it? That way we're both wearing it, kind of."

Ian's eyes lit up at this solution. "Like we're sharing the promise!"

"Exactly like that." Derek pulled the candy off the plastic base and broke it carefully in half, handing one piece to Ian and keeping the other for himself. "See? Now we both have part of the ring."

They popped the candy into their mouths simultaneously, the sweet blue raspberry flavor bursting across their tongues. Ian grinned around the candy, his teeth already staining slightly blue, and Derek couldn't help but smile back despite the lingering awkwardness of the situation.

"Can we watch Superman again?" Ian asked, already reaching for the remote with blue-stained fingers. "Please? To celebrate?"

Derek glanced at the clock, noting that they still had at least an hour before Mrs. Mitchell would call them for dinner. "Alright, Lane. One more time. But this is definitely the last one."

"Yay!" Ian snuggled against Derek's side as the opening credits began once more, the familiar music filling the living room with heroic promise.

As Superman's iconic theme swelled and Christopher Reeve appeared on screen once again, Derek reached for the plastic Ring Pop base that Ian had set on the coffee table. He turned it over in his fingers, examining the simple blue plastic circle with its empty center where the candy had been.

I should throw this away, he thought. It's just trash now.

But instead, he found himself slipping it into his own pocket, telling himself he'd dispose of it later. Somehow, "later" never quite came. The little blue plastic ring base would stay in his pocket that day, and then get transferred to his desk drawer, and then eventually to a small box where he kept odd mementos from childhood—a baseball signed by his Little League team, a ticket stub from his first concert, a pressed flower from some forgotten occasion.

Years later, that blue plastic ring would find its way into Derek Lawson's pocket again, pulled from a childhood memory box at a moment when the past would collide with the present in ways neither of them could foresee on this sun-drenched afternoon. Between now and then stretched a labyrinth of years—through Derek coming out as gay at sixteen, through Ian's own journey of self-discovery, through all the ways that life pulls people apart and sometimes, if you're very lucky, brings them back together in ways you never imagined possible.

What Derek would do with that ring when it resurfaced, what words he would speak and to whom, what promises would finally be kept or broken—all of that remained unwritten, a future shimmering like heat waves on distant pavement.

For now, in this perfect afternoon suspended in amber sunlight and blue raspberry sweetness, they were simply a ten-year-old boy and his five-year-old admirer, watching Superman fly across the screen.

Somewhere in the pocket of Derek's shorts, a plastic ring base waited—patient as only inanimate objects can be—knowing that some promises plant seeds deeper than anyone realizes, roots that grow quietly in the dark until one day, impossibly, they break through into light.

"Derek?" Ian's voice was drowsy now, the excitement and sugar crash beginning to catch up with him.

"Yeah, buddy?"

"Thanks for saying yes."

Derek looked down at the little boy curled against his side, at the blue-stained smile and the absolute contentment on his small face. Despite his embarrassment, despite the impossibility of it all, Derek found himself genuinely moved by the simple trust in Ian's eyes.

"You're welcome, Lane," he said softly, his hand coming to rest on Ian's blonde head with a gentleness that surprised even himself.
"You're welcome."

Outside, the summer afternoon stretched on forever, as if time itself had decided to pause and let this moment breathe. The shadows grew longer across the Mitchell's lawn, birds sang their evening songs, and somewhere in the distance, a dog barked at some imagined threat.

But inside, in the living room that smelled like popcorn and childhood and promises, two boys watched Superman save the world one more time.

And in Derek's pocket, a blue plastic ring waited.

And waited.

And waited...

Book One: Blue Raspberry

1 – Eighteen Eve

The summer sun poured down on Ian's face as he sat in the lush, emerald grass of Metropolis Park. Towering above him was a majestic oak tree, its outstretched branches forming a verdant canopy.

But something was off—the leaves shimmered with an iridescent glow, changing colors like a kaleidoscope as they rustled in the breeze.

Beside him, Derek's presence radiated like an electric current, sending tingles through Ian's body.

Ian turned his head and gazed at Derek, admiring every angle of his profile - the sharp line of his jaw, the fullness of his lips, the way his dark lashes brushed against his cheeks.

The sunlight filtered through the leaves above them, dancing across Derek's shirtless torso and giving it a subtle, otherworldly sheen.

Ian blinked, and suddenly Derek's skin was covered in a constellation of glow-in-the-dark stars, pulsing softly with ethereal light. The same stars Derek had helped him stick to his ceiling when he was five. The same stars they'd applied together while Derek carried him on his shoulders, Ian's small hands pressing each one carefully into place.

Derek's sun-kissed skin glowed in the dappled light, casting a golden hue on his bare chest. His chiseled form was a masterpiece of muscle, from the defined curves of his pecs, the ridges of his washboard abs, to the "V Cup" that was a pathway to what those jeans, almost ready to burst, held back. With every movement, his muscles rippled beneath his skin like powerful waves crashing against the shore, each ripple leaving a trail of stardust in its wake.

"You kept them," Ian whispered, reaching out to trace the constellation of stars across Derek's warm chest.

Derek caught his hand, and Ian felt something slip onto his finger. Cool. Circular. He looked down to see a Ring Pop—blue raspberry, just like the one from that summer afternoon thirteen years ago—but this one was real. Solid. Made of sapphire that caught the light and threw prisms across the grass.

"I kept it," Derek said, his voice low and intimate. "I kept my promise, Lane."

The nickname sent a shiver down Ian's spine. Lane. Derek had called him that since he was three years old, when Ian had first decided that Derek Lawson was Superman incarnate.

"But I'm not finished with high school yet," Ian said, the words feeling thick and sweet on his tongue, tasting of blue raspberry candy. "You said we had to wait until—"

"You're almost there," Derek interrupted, leaning closer. His bare chest nearly brushed against Ian's clothed one, and Ian could feel the heat radiating from Derek's skin. His breath was warm against Ian's lips, and

Ian could smell summer and promises and everything good. "One more day, Lane. Just one more day."

The ring on Ian's finger grew warm, then hot, then impossibly bright. Blue light emanated from it, the same color as Derek's eyes, the same color as that candy they'd shared on the couch while Gavin snored and Superman saved the world on the television screen.

"I still love you," Ian breathed, the words he'd said at five spilling from his seventeen-year-old mouth with the same desperate honesty. "I don't really think I knew what it meant back then, but I know now, Derek. I love you. You're still my Superman."

Derek's hand cupped his face, thumb brushing across Ian's cheek. "And you're still my Lane."

Then Derek was kissing him, and Ian tasted blue raspberry and summer afternoons and thirteen years of waiting. Derek's other hand found Ian's, their fingers intertwining, the Ring Pop pressed between their palms like a secret, like a promise kept. Ian's free hand moved to Derek's bare chest, fingers tracing the defined curves of his pecs, feeling the strong, steady heartbeat beneath the constellation of stars, feeling the warmth of sun-kissed skin and the solid reality of muscle and bone.

Around them, the park began to shift. The grass beneath them transformed into the plush carpet of the Mitchell living room. The oak tree became the old couch where they'd watched Superman movies on repeat. The impossible sky resolved into the familiar ceiling of Ian's childhood, covered in glow-in-the-dark stars that Derek had helped him place with such patience and care.

"Fly with me," Derek whispered against Ian's lips.

And suddenly they were rising—not just standing but actually lifting off the ground, Derek's strong arms around Ian's waist, Ian's arms around Derek's neck, his palms pressed against the broad expanse of Derek's bare shoulders. The muscles rippled beneath Ian's touch like waves, powerful and graceful. They rose above the couch, above the living room, above the mansion, soaring through an impossible sky that was somehow both day and night, filled with stars that pulsed in rhythm with Ian's heartbeat.

Ian laughed, free and uninhibited, the wind whipping through his hair.

This was what he'd always imagined when he was five, watching Superman fly across the television screen. This feeling of weightlessness, of safety, of being held by someone strong enough to keep him from falling. Derek's body was warm and solid against his, all defined muscle and gentle strength, the ridges of his washboard abs pressed against Ian's torso.

"I knew you could fly," Ian said, his voice full of wonder. "I always knew."

Derek's laugh rumbled through his chest, and Ian felt it vibrate against his own body. "Only you know the truth, Lane. Only you."

They descended slowly, gently, landing in a field of blue raspberry Ring Pops that grew from the ground like flowers. Each one sparkled in the strange light, and when Ian looked at his hand, the sapphire ring had

multiplied—now there were rings on every finger, all glowing that same impossible blue.

Derek stood before him, shirtless and beautiful in the dappled light, his sun-kissed skin glowing golden. The glow-in-the-dark stars on his chest now joined by more stars trailing down his arms, across his shoulders, following the V-shaped pathway that disappeared into his jeans. Ian's gaze traced every defined curve of Derek's pecs, every ridge of his abs, mesmerized by the way his muscles rippled with each breath like powerful waves crashing against the shore.

"Too many promises," Ian said, but he was smiling.

"Never enough," Derek countered, pulling him close. Ian's hands splayed across Derek's bare back, feeling the play of muscle beneath warm skin, feeling the constellation of stars pulse with light beneath his fingertips. "I could make you a thousand promises and it wouldn't be enough."

The rings began to glow brighter, so bright Ian had to close his eyes against the light. When he opened them again, he was back under the oak tree, back in Metropolis Park, but now the glow-in-the-dark stars from Derek's chest were floating in the air around them like fireflies, like wishes made tangible.

Derek reached out and caught one, pressing it into Ian's palm. It was warm and alive, pulsing with light. His other hand rested on Ian's cheek, and Ian could see every detail of him—the way the sunlight caught in his dark hair, the blue of his eyes, the strong line of his throat, the rise and fall of his masterpiece chest with each breath, muscles rippling beneath golden skin.

"Keep this," Derek said. "Until tomorrow. Until you're eighteen. Until it's time."

"Time for what?" Ian asked, even though he knew, had always known.

"Time for me to keep my promise," Derek said simply. His thumb traced Ian's lower lip, and Ian's breath caught. "Time for Superman to say yes to his Lane. The tell everybody..."

The star in Ian's hand burst into brilliance, and Ian felt himself falling—not down but forward, through time, through space, through thirteen years of longing compressed into a single moment—

BZZZT!

BZZZT!!

BZZZT!!!

The harsh electronic shriek tore through the dream world.

Colors bled away, the stars dimmed, and Derek's warm presence evaporated like morning dew in summer heat.

Ian's hand shot out, fumbling in the semi-darkness for his alarm clock. His fingers found the plastic button and pressed down hard, silencing the merciless noise that had ripped him from his fantasy.

He groaned, falling back onto his pillow, heart still pounding. The ceiling above him came into focus—ordinary, mundane, scattered with the faded glow-in-the-dark stars that had inspired his dream's cosmic imagery. He blinked rapidly, trying to hold onto the wisps of the dream as reality seeped in to replace them.

His skin still tingled with the phantom sensation of Derek's warmth, the memory of sun-kissed skin beneath his palms, the solid reality of Derek's chiseled body against his own—those defined pecs, those washboard abs, that perfect V-shape leading to possibilities Ian could only dream about. The dream had felt so real he could almost still feel the constellation of stars beneath his fingertips, could almost hear Derek's voice calling him Lane with that mixture of affection and promise.

The phantom taste of blue raspberry candy lingered on his tongue—sweet and nostalgic, like that summer afternoon thirteen years ago when he'd offered Derek a Ring Pop and Derek had said yes.

Tomorrow was his eighteenth birthday.

Tomorrow, everything would change.

He lay still for a moment, staring at the faint green glow of his alarm clock. The digits flicked over with a soft plastic click, marking the seconds he couldn't get back. Each one seemed louder than the last—like time itself was holding its breath with him.

What would his father say if he knew the nature of Ian's dreams?

The way Dr. Graham Mitchell had cheered at every football game but had viewed choir as simply “well-rounded” for his athletic son said enough.

In the Mitchell family, being talented in multiple arenas was expected—Derek and Gavin had managed football, basketball, choir, and Take Five without breaking a sweat.

Ian only had his voice, and in the Mitchell family, that wasn't enough.

Ian had spent years watching his father clap Derek on the back, telling the star quarterback he was “still one of the guys” after he came out.

But Derek wasn't Graham's son—he was the ‘Golden Boy Gavin's’ best friend, practically family but not actually blood.

Would the same acceptance extend to Ian, the son who already didn't quite fit the Mitchell mold?

One day away from eighteen years old, Ian was slender, almost delicately built for his 5'9" frame, weighing in at 130lbs. His dirty blonde

hair, perpetually worn messy, framed a face that was undeniably handsome, though he seemed entirely unaware of it... yet.

His green eyes, often downcast, held a hint of youthful uncertainty as he blinked against the morning light filtering through his curtains.

In just under twenty-four hours, everything would change.

The thought sent a shiver down his spine, making the memory of Derek's touch feel both more precious and more dangerous.

The phantom warmth of Derek's almost-kiss still tingled on Ian's lips, fading like morning mist.

Morning light filtered through his curtains, creating dancing patterns that reminded him of the dream's shimmering leaves. Almost unconsciously, Ian began to hum a melody—something from the Take Five repertoire they'd been perfecting for the graduation ceremony.

His 'morning voice' was always his best, rich and warm without trying.

His music teacher, Ms. Badino, had called it his "bedroom voice"—then immediately turned bright red as the class erupted in laughter.

The memory made Ian smile despite his nerves.

Take Five had been his refuge these past four years—the one place where his sensitivity was an asset rather than a target.

Being the first freshman ever selected still felt like his greatest achievement, even if Gavin and Derek's shadow loomed large over that accomplishment too.

It was Friday, June 9th, 1995 at exactly 6:30 AM, and this was the last time he would ever have to wake up for high school.

Ian's eyes traced the familiar constellations on his ceiling, the faint phosphorescent glow triggering a flood of memories that made his heart ache.

They had been a 10th birthday gift from Derek exactly eight years ago to the day...

The memory of that day was as clear as crystal...

The air was thick with the scent of sunscreen and chlorine. Ten-year-old Ian sat at the pool's edge, his feet dangling in the cool water as he watched Derek swim laps.

The fifteen-year-old moved through the water with effortless grace, his athletic body cutting clean lines through the blue.

When Derek finally emerged from the pool, water cascaded down his sun-kissed skin, making him look like some kind of teenage demigod.

Superman...

His dark hair was slicked back, droplets clinging to his long eyelashes. The sight made Ian's young heart race in ways he wouldn't understand for years to come.

“Hey, Lane,” Derek had called out, grabbing a towel. “Water’s great. You should come in!”

Lane was Derek’s special nickname for Ian that only Derek used. It had started when Ian was just five and Derek, seeing how the middle Mitchell boy idolized Superman, had dubbed him “Little Lane” after Lois Lane. Over time, it had shortened to just “Lane,” a small intimacy between them that no one else shared.

But Ian had been too mesmerized to move, watching as Derek dried off and approached him

“Come on, I’ve got something for you,” Derek said, extending his hand to help Ian up. His grip was warm and strong, despite the pool water still clinging to his skin.

Later that night, they stood in Ian’s room, Derek lifting him onto his broad shoulders as they decorated the ceiling with the plastic stars he had gotten Ian for his tenth birthday.

“Hold still, Little Lane,” Derek had laughed as Ian nearly dropped a star. “We want these constellations to be perfect.”

“Thanks for the stars, Superman! And for helping me put them up. You’re the best!” Ian had giggled, and Derek’s answering laugh had rumbled through both their bodies.

“Even the stars have to find their place in the sky,” Derek had said as they finished, his voice taking on that older-brother wisdom that always made Ian feel safe. “Sometimes it just takes time to figure out where you belong.”

Now, eight years later, Ian stared at those same stars, their glow diminished by time but the memory as bright as ever.

That day had marked the beginning of something - his admiration for Derek transforming into something deeper, more complex:

It was the day Derek became his Superman, in more ways than he could have known at the time.

The memory faded, leaving Ian with a bittersweet ache in his chest. He was no longer that wide-eyed ten-year-old, and Derek... well, Derek had grown into exactly the kind of man Ian had always known he would be:

Out, proud, and seemingly untouchable.

Derek had told the Mitchells he was gay when he was sixteen, just after leading the football team to the state championship.

After his own parents kicked him out, Graham and Imogen had let him stay in their guest room until graduation.

“Being gay doesn’t change who you are, son,” Graham had told Derek, while Ian listened from the hallway, heart in his throat.

But would those same words apply to Ian?

Derek was Gavin’s best friend, the star quarterback who could also hit a perfect harmony in Take Five—gay, yes, but still fitting neatly

into Graham Mitchell's definition of masculinity with his balanced portfolio of talents.

Ian, with his choir medals but no sports trophies, already failed to meet that standard.

Coming out wouldn't just be adding one difference—it would be confirming what Ian suspected his father already feared: that his middle son was nothing like the rest of them.

Ian looked around his small bedroom. Unlike the rest of the sprawling Grosse Pointe Tudor “Mitchell Mansion,” with its grand rooms and antique furnishings, Ian's space was a reflection of his own tastes—band posters covering the walls, a cluttered desk beneath the window that overlooked the manicured backyard and the glittering expanse of Lake St. Clair beyond.

Posters of Nirvana, Green Day, and a freshly hung Alanis Morissette's ‘Jagged Little Pill’ album cover adorned the walls.

Kurt Cobain's intense gaze seemed to watch Ian as he woke up.

A well-worn copy of “The Real Book”—the jazz musician's bible of sheet music—lay open on his desk, covered in his meticulous notations.

Nearby stood a small keyboard, its keys slightly yellowed from use.

His father had wanted him to play football like Isaac and Gavin; his mother had pushed for piano lessons.

The compromise had been voice lessons, but Ian had taught himself piano anyway, picking out melodies by ear until he could accompany himself on the jazz standards he loved but would never admit to preferring over the grunge that plastered his walls.

It was his secret rebellion—loving Ella Fitzgerald in an era of Eddie Vedder.

Below him, The Mitchell household stirred to life. Floorboards creaked and muffled voices echoed throughout the house. His mother's enthusiastic yet exasperated voice carried upstairs as she corralled his younger siblings. Her sharp commands were met with the deeper rumbling responses of his father, who was likely already scanning the morning paper.

The scents of freshly brewed coffee and warm breakfast foods wafted through the air, adding to the lively atmosphere of the household waking up. It was a comforting symphony that he had grown accustomed to over the years, a daily routine that signaled the start of a new day in the Mitchell family.

With a deep breath, Ian closed his eyes and let the stillness of the morning wash over him. The house was a whirlwind of activity, a constant state of chaos brought on by his older brother Gavin's upcoming wedding.

Three hundred guests.

Here at The Mitchell Mansion.

Everywhere he turned, there were reminders of the event - seating charts scattered on the table, fabric swatches pinned to walls, and the incessant chatter about the venue and guest list.

Even Ian's birthday had been overshadowed by the wedding frenzy, relegated to just a mere footnote in the family's collective consciousness.

But it wasn't just his birthday.

Tomorrow was the day Derek's promise was supposed to come true—the day Ian turned eighteen and finished high school, meeting the exact conditions Derek had set thirteen years ago. The day that had shaped every choice Ian had made, every person he hadn't let himself fall for, every dream he'd built around a blue raspberry Ring Pop and a ten-year-old's indulgent "yes."

Derek had never mentioned that day in the thirteen years since, and Ian was sure he had forgotten... Or at least just figured it was a silly five year old boy's hero worship crush. To Ian... It was still everything.

The realization stung more than he cared to admit.

Eighteen was supposed to be special, wasn't it? It was supposed to be the end of waiting.

Letting out a heavy sigh, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and stood up. As he made his way to the closet, his mind deliberated over the different clothes options.

It was the final day of school - did it truly matter what he wore?

His hand hesitated over his favorite sweater, the soft blue one that brought out his eyes.

Derek had once offhandedly mentioned it looked nice on him.

Ian's fingers traced the soft fabric, his heart doing a familiar flip.

Blue.

Like the raspberry Ring Pop.

Like Derek's eyes.

Like every wish Ian had ever made on birthday candles and shooting stars and glow-in-the-dark constellations stuck to his ceiling. The morning light caught the sweater's texture, creating tiny shadows that reminded him of the star-patterns that had danced across Derek's skin in his dream.

"It's just a sweater," he muttered, trying to ignore how pathetic it was that he'd held onto a two-year-old compliment the way he'd held onto a thirteen-year-old promise.

But nothing was "just" anything anymore—not with today's confession looming, not with the weight of eighteen years of secrets pressing down on him. Not with Derek completely unaware that tomorrow marked the day his forgotten promise came due.

"Get it together, Ian. He probably doesn't even remember saying it."

Just like he doesn't remember the Ring Pop. Just like he doesn't remember saying yes.

He shook his head, banishing the thought.

Derek was Gavin's soon-to-be best man. They had been inseparable since the first day of kindergarten

Even though Derek was an out and proud gay man, and had been ever since he and Gavin were sixteen, he was off limits in more ways than Ian could count.

He pushed away the thoughts of Derek, unaware of how central those feelings would become in the hours to come.

The shrill sound of his mother's voice pierced through Ian's daydreams and brought him back to reality. "Ian!" she called urgently. "Breakfast! It's your last day!!! You'll be late!"

"Coming!" he called back with a sense of urgency. His hand brushed past a pair of baggy JNCO jeans and settled on his favorite faded Levi's. He pulled out a flannel shirt to layer over his New Order tee, completing the grunge look that had become his signature style.

As he left his room, the familiar knot of anxiety tightened in his stomach.

Just one more day of navigating the minefield of high school hallways.

One more day of stolen glances and carefully chosen words.

One more day before he could finally be honest about who he was.

He paused outside Gavin's old room. His brother had moved out a few weeks ago.

He and Hillary bought a house in Grosse Pointe, a short drive away.

His room was now converted into an opulent guest suite. Its prime location, with panoramic views of the lake, was a testament to Gavin's favored status.

In contrast, Ian's own room was tucked away in the back corner of the house, as if an afterthought.

Despite the mansion's numerous rooms and spacious layout, Ian often felt suffocated. The weight of family expectations seemed to press in on him from all sides, much like the ornate moldings and heavy draperies that adorned every room.

He made his way down the sweeping staircase, his hand trailing along the smooth, polished banister. The crystal chandelier above caught the morning light, casting prismatic reflections across the marble foyer.

Ian could hear his mother's voice echoing from the gourmet kitchen, the heart of their home despite its restaurant-grade appliances

and massive center island. Like every school day morning, it was a buzzing hub of activity, with pots and pans clanging against the stove and dishes clattering in the sink.

The radio on the counter was tuned to the local Top 40 station, TLC's 'Waterfalls' providing a backdrop to the morning chaos.

The phone on the wall rang shrilly, its long cord tangling around Imogen as she rushed to answer it.

His younger sister, Gwen, was engaged in a heated argument with their brother Isaac over the last bowl of cereal, their voices rising above the sounds of the bustling kitchen.

Gwen, her pigtails bobbing emphatically, stamped her foot. "But Mo-om! Isaac always gets the last of the Froot Loops!"

Seven years old and standing 4'10" at 85lbs, Gwen had long blonde hair and green eyes, inheriting her mother's pretty features.

Isaac rolled his eyes, his voice cracking slightly as he retorted, "Snooze you lose, squirt. I've got soccer practice later. I need the energy."

Fifteen years old, Isaac already had the solid, muscular build of a football player at 5'10" and 155lbs. His light brown hair was short and spiked up, emphasizing handsome features and bright green eyes.

Gwen's lower lip trembled. "You're so mean! I hope you fumble all the balls!"

"That's enough, you two," Imogen intervened. "No, no, the Hendersons can't sit with the Petersons," she said into the phone, wedged between her ear and shoulder.

Forty-four years old, Imogen possessed a timeless, classic beauty that reminded some of Michelle Pfeiffer. She stood 5'9" and maintained a fit build at 115lbs, her blonde hair complementing striking blue eyes.

"Because Karen Henderson tried to steal Jim Peterson from his wife at the Christmas party in 1985, remember? Yes, I know it was ten years ago. Trust me, neither of them has forgotten."

"There you are," Imogen said, barely looking up as she hung up the phone. "Eat quickly, please. And don't forget you're helping with the place cards after school."

Ian nodded, reaching for a piece of toast.

"Mom, I was thinking... about tonight."

Imogen barely glanced up from her seating chart. "Hmm? Oh, right - Gavin called earlier. He and Derek will pick you up after school." She frowned at the paper. "Now, where am I supposed to seat your Aunt Mildred..."

"Oh? How come?" Ian asked, his pulse quickening at the mention of Derek's name.

"You guys have your tuxedo fittings at Sacchi's at 4:30."

Ian's heart skipped a beat. Derek. Today.

The day before the promise came due, the day before Ian turned eighteen and officially finished high school—the exact conditions Derek had set with such casual kindness thirteen years ago.

Every encounter with Derek was a delicate balance between longing and denial, a dance of emotions that Ian had grown all too familiar with. But this felt different. Significant. Like the universe was putting them together on this day of all days—the last day before tomorrow, when Derek's forgotten promise would hang in the air between them, visible only to Ian.

His fingers tightened around his toast, leaving indentations in the bread.

Glancing quickly at his mother, who was now deep in a conversation with Gwen about a summer art class project, Ian turned back to his breakfast. The butter melted into golden pools, reminding him of the dappled sunlight on Derek's skin in his dream—and of the way Derek's ears had turned red when five-year-old Ian had asked him to marry him.

It was an ordinary arrangement for Derek and Gavin to pick him up from school, one that had happened countless times before. Derek had no idea what tomorrow meant. Had no memory of blue raspberry candy or shared promises.

Seeing Derek both thrilled and terrified Ian.

While growing up, Gavin and Derek had often included him in their adventures and escapades, this time it was different.

This time, Ian wouldn't be on the sidelines but would be joining them on the frontlines as they prepared for the biggest adventure of all - Gavin's wedding.

"Right, but Mom, about tonight—"

His mother looked at him with a look that couldn't be called anything but annoyance. Her eyebrows drew together, and her lips thinned into a line that Ian recognized all too well.

"Ian, do you not understand the magnitude of what we have to do in one week? We have a wedding here, in this house, with three hundred people attending. All four of your grandparents are flying in from Florida today, and will be here for nine days! I have to prepare for their arrival. And yet here you are, asking me about some silly 'last day of school celebration' with your friends. Fine, go ahead and waste your time. Just make sure you're back by 1 am."

Ian took in a breath, and he wanted to scream: "Mom, do you even remember what tomorrow is?"

But the words stayed lodged in his throat, unspoken. Instead, his jaw clenched, and his shoulders tensed as he swallowed the hurt.

Ian's voice rang out, laced with both anger and hurt. "Jeez, mom," he exclaimed, his emotions bubbling to the surface. "This damn wedding is all anyone can talk about."

With a huff, he stood up from his spot at the table and made his way to where his backpack hung on a peg by the coats and jackets. His footsteps were heavier than necessary, each one a small act of defiance.

"Ian," she said gently, using her motherly tone that always had a way of soothing him. "Come here."

Reluctantly, Ian grabbed his backpack and slung it over one shoulder before making his way back to his mother. Each step felt like moving through molasses, every second bringing him closer to the moment when her gentle tone might vanish forever.

Would she still look at him with such love tomorrow?

Would any of them?

She reached out and placed a hand on his cheek, her touch filled with love and warmth. The familiar scent of her perfume—something floral and expensive—enveloped him, bringing back memories of childhood comfort.

"Look at you," she smiled softly through glistening eyes. "My little boy is all grown up." A swell of emotion rose in Ian's chest at her words. "I'm so very proud of you," she continued, her hand moving to tousle his hair affectionately. "Have a good day, sweetheart."

Isaac smirked, elbowing Ian playfully. "So, bro, got a date for the wedding yet? Or should we set aside a table for you and your right hand?" He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Ian felt his cheeks burn, the flush spreading up to his ears. Before he could retort, Isaac continued, "Maybe if you spent less time singing and more time at the gym like Gavin and me, you'd have better luck."

"Yeah, because your personality is working so well for you," Ian shot back, his fingers drumming a complex rhythm on the table—a nervous habit he'd developed from years of vocal percussion in Take Five. "Besides, Mr. Harlow says I've got the best jazz voice he's heard in twenty years of teaching. That'll last longer than your spiral throw."

Isaac rolled his eyes. "Great, you can serenade your cats when you're old and alone."

"Isaac," their mother warned, but Ian could see the pride in her eyes as she glanced at Isaac's athletic build, the same pride that only appeared for Ian when he was on stage, hitting notes no one else in the school could reach.

Ian's stomach churned, not just from hunger but from the weight of his secret.

He watched his family, each playing their assigned roles - Isaac the jock, Gwen the baby, Gavin the golden child.

Where did he fit in this picture?

The thought of disrupting this carefully balanced ecosystem with his truth made his chest tighten with anxiety while simultaneously sending a thrill of anticipation down his spine.

He remembered vividly the day Derek had come back from his parents' house, eyes red-rimmed but chin held high. Derek's usually confident posture had been brittle that day, as if he might shatter if touched too roughly. But there was also a new freedom in his movements, the unburdening that comes with finally speaking your truth.

Gavin had thrown an arm around him, how Graham had offered him a beer despite them being underage. The casual acceptance had seemed miraculous to Ian, watching from the shadows of the hallway.

"Some people don't understand," Graham had said, his voice gruff with emotion, "but you'll always have a place here."

But Ian couldn't help noticing how his father's acceptance came wrapped in expectations—Derek was still the quarterback, still sang baritone in Take Five, still maintained the perfect balance of talents that the Mitchell men were expected to possess.

Ian had watched Derek carefully navigate this acceptance, proving over and over that being gay hadn't changed his ability to throw a perfect spiral or rebuild a carburetor with Graham on weekends.

Was that the best he could hope for?

Conditional acceptance, predicated on compensating in other areas?

Ian, who had tried out for football freshman year only to quit after two weeks of misery, had no such compensation to offer.

The thought made the toast in his mouth turn to ash.

"What? I'm just saying," Isaac shrugged, flexing his bicep. "Coach says I might even make varsity next year as a sophomore. That's when the real dating pool opens up."

"Maybe... if you worked on being more of a gentleman, rather than how your body looks, more girls would show an interest!" Imogen said, sternly.

Isaac flexed his bicep, admiring himself in the reflection of the toaster.

The morning light caught the contours of his developing muscles, casting small shadows that emphasized their definition.

A crumpled math test peeked out from his backpack, the red 'D' barely visible. Ian noticed but said nothing, remembering how his attempts to help his brother with homework had been rebuffed lately.

'I don't need to be smart,' Isaac had said, eyes narrowed defensively. 'I've got sports.'

Their father entered the kitchen, already dressed in his suit for work. The fabric was perfectly tailored to his athletic build, not a

wrinkle in sight. His gold watch caught the light as he reached for the coffee pot.

Graham, 45 years old, was a commanding presence at 6'0" and 160lbs, with a fit, muscular build. His light brown hair was impeccably styled, a contrast to Ian's messy mane, and his green eyes held a familiar familial gaze. He was undeniably handsome, almost invoking the charm of a young Robert Redford.

Graham chuckled, ruffling Ian's hair as he passed. "Easy there, champ," he said to Isaac before turning to Ian. "Don't let him get to you, son. The right girl will come along when you least expect it. No need to force these things."

Ian felt the weight of his secret identity pressing down on him, as heavy as any cape. If only his father knew that his son's true self was hidden in plain sight, just like the Clark Kent in his dreams. His throat tightened, the words he longed to say pressing against the back of his teeth, desperate to be released.

Ian's stomach churned. If only they knew how little interest he had in finding a girl.

If only he could explain why without fear of their reactions.

He remembered the night two years ago when Graham had made an offhand comment about a "sissy" character on TV. The casual disgust in his father's voice had cut through Ian like a blade, each syllable slicing away at his sense of safety.

How the casual disgust in his voice had made Ian shrink into himself, even as Derek sat uncomfortably silent across the room. Derek's knuckles had whitened around his soda can, the only visible sign of his discomfort.

Derek had caught Ian's eye afterward, and Ian could have sworn that a moment of silent understanding had passed between them, but they never spoke of it or acknowledged it. The memory of that look—Derek's blue eyes filled with a mixture of sympathy and shared pain—had haunted Ian for months.

Derek had proven himself in Graham's eyes long before coming out—star quarterback, accomplished singer who could still talk sports, Gavin's best friend.

Ian had none of those buffers. Just his voice and his slender frame that no amount of Gavin's protein shakes had been able to bulk up.

He wanted to shout, to tell them all that there would never be a 'right young lady,' but the words remained trapped behind years of fear and uncertainty.

"How does it feel?" Graham asked, opening the kitchen cupboard and grabbing his thermos.

"How does what feel?" Ian asked, hoping he was talking about his birthday.

Graham took his thermos, and proceeded to fill it with what remained in the coffee pot. "Being a high school graduate! It's the last day of school!"

Ian's heart sank as his father's words echoed in his mind. Not a word about his birthday tomorrow. The omission felt like a physical weight pressing down on his chest.

Were they seriously all going to forget?

"It feels... great, Dad," he answered, the words tasting bitter on his tongue. "Exciting."

Graham gave him an encouraging smile, oblivious to the storm raging beneath Ian's calm facade. As he grabbed his briefcase and headed towards the door, he clapped Ian on the shoulder.

His father nodded thoughtfully, a hint of nostalgia flickering in his eyes. "I remember my last day of school like it was yesterday," Graham recalled, a wistful smile playing on his lips. "So many possibilities ahead, so many choices to make."

If only his father knew just how life-altering the choices Ian was about to make would be.

Graham kissed Imogen and Gwen on their cheeks and left.

"I should bounce too Mom," he mumbled, grabbing his backpack. "Shawnee will be here to pick me up any minute."

Ian felt a smile tug at his lips as he thought of Shawnee, Renee, and Amelia.

His friends were the one bright spot in all of this. And tonight... Tonight everything would change after he told them the secret he'd been harboring for so long.

He was halfway to the door when his mother's voice stopped him.

"Oh! Ian, wait—I almost forgot."

He froze mid-step. For a heartbeat, the house fell quiet—the clatter of dishes, the distant hum of the radio—all muted by the suspense of waiting to be remembered. He turned to find Imogen rummaging through her purse on the counter, that oversized leather bag that seemed to contain half her life. She emerged triumphant, holding something small wrapped in clear cellophane.

"I saw these at the grocery store yesterday," she said, pressing the item into his hand with a smile that was simultaneously nostalgic and a little sad. "Do you remember how much you loved these when you were little? You used to beg for them every time we went shopping." Her eyes grew misty. "I know it's silly, but I thought... well, it's your last day of school. A little gift. For luck."

Ian looked down at his palm.

A Ring Pop.

Blue raspberry.

The world seemed to tilt on its axis.

Time slowed, sounds muffled, and all Ian could do was stare at the candy in his hand—the same blue as the one in his dream, the same blue as the one he'd given Derek thirteen years ago on a summer afternoon that smelled of popcorn and promises.

The plastic ring caught the morning light streaming through the kitchen window, throwing tiny prisms across his palm. Blue. That particular shade of blue that matched Derek's eyes, that tasted like childhood summers and impossible dreams.

"Ian? Honey, are you alright?" Imogen's voice seemed to come from very far away.

He blinked rapidly, his throat tight. The phantom taste from his dream—blue raspberry, sweet and nostalgic—suddenly felt real on his tongue again.

Tomorrow. Until you're eighteen. Until it's time.

Derek's dream-voice echoed in his memory.

Time for me to keep my promise.

"I..." Ian's voice came out rough, and he had to clear his throat.

"Thank you, Mom. I... I love these."

The words felt inadequate for the magnitude of what he was feeling. This couldn't be a coincidence. The dream, and now this? The universe was speaking to him in blue raspberry.

Imogen beamed, completely unaware that she'd just handed her son a sign from fate itself. "I thought you might. Now go on, you'll be late. And remember—tuxedo fitting at 4:30!"

"Bye, loser!" Isaac shouted pompously.

Imogen smacked Isaac on the shoulder lightly, and smiled at Ian.

"Go get 'em, honey."

Just as Ian reached for the doorknob to step outside Gwen tugged at his sleeve, her eyes wide.

"Ian, can you help me with my summer art project tonight? I'm making a family portrait for show-and-tell." She held up a crayon drawing where Ian towered over the rest of the family, a crude microphone in his hand. "See? I made you a rock star!"

Ian's heart melted a little. At least someone in the family saw him clearly. He crouched down to her level, examining the colorful drawing with exaggerated seriousness.

"Is that me singing?" he asked, pointing to the stick figure with musical notes floating around its head.

Gwen nodded enthusiastically. "Uh-huh! Like when you did that really high note at the winter concert and everyone stood up! I told all my friends my brother is famous."

The memory of that night flashed through Ian's mind—the spotlight hot on his face, the moment of perfect silence before he hit

that impossible note, and then the wave of applause washing over him. For that brief moment, he had felt seen, truly seen, for who he was.

“Sure thing, Gwennie. We’ll work on it tonight, okay? Maybe I’ll even teach you that hand trick for remembering the solfège scale.” He wiggled his fingers in the familiar pattern that had become second nature after years of music theory.

Gwen beamed, then stuck her tongue out at Isaac.

“At least Ian helps me. Unlike some people.”

Before he walked out, he glanced at the family calendar hanging on the wall. June 10th - his birthday - was conspicuously blank.

No note, no reminder.

The sight made his chest tighten with disappointment that churned quickly into anger, then resignation.

Ian clutched the Ring Pop in his fist, his heart hammering against his ribs. He could feel the plastic base pressing into his palm, solid and real and impossible.

As he stepped outside into the late June morning, he uncurling his fingers and looked at it again.

Blue raspberry.

Just like the promise

Just like the dream.

He stepped out onto the front porch, and the crisp morning air greeted him, carrying with it the promise of a new beginning.

As he inhaled the sweet smell of lilacs coming from the bush his mother had planted years ago under the living room’s bay windows, Ian wondered what Derek was doing right now.

Probably getting ready for work at that fancy advertising firm. Ian imagined Derek in his crisp shirt and tie, his black hair styled in a perfect pompadour. Would his hands linger on the buttons of his shirt? Would he catch his own reflection and pause, wondering if he looked good enough? Or did that kind of confidence come naturally to someone like Derek—someone who had already faced his biggest fear and come out stronger on the other side?

He allowed himself to imagine a different scenario - one where it was Derek coming to pick him up instead of Shawnee. Derek pulling up in his sleek black car, reaching across to open the passenger door, that half-smile playing on his lips as Ian slid into the seat beside him.

The fantasy was fleeting but powerful, sending a rush of warmth through Ian’s body that had nothing to do with the summer morning.

As he waited, Ian’s mind drifted to the confession he planned to make later. The thought of finally saying the words out loud, of admitting to himself and others who he really was, filled him with equal parts terror and relief.

As Ian waited for Shawnee, he thought about his siblings. Isaac, always trying so hard to be the “man” of the house, pushing himself in sports, acting tough. The pressure seemed to be crushing him sometimes, forcing him into a mold that might be just as uncomfortable for Isaac as it was for Ian.

And little Gwen, creative and sensitive, always seeking attention in her own way. Would she understand when she was older? Would she still look at him with that same unconditional adoration?

He felt a pang of guilt for not spending more time with them lately, caught up in his own dramas. Maybe after the big revelation, he could be a better brother to them both.

His eyes scanned the quiet suburban street, searching for Shawnee’s familiar car. Just as he spotted the familiar silver sedan turning the corner, a pang of nervous excitement shot through him.

Today was not just any ordinary day; it was a day of revelations and possibilities.

Ian slipped the Ring Pop into his pocket, feeling its weight there like a talisman, like proof that some promises were worth keeping.

That some dreams were meant to come true.

Tomorrow was his eighteenth birthday.

Today was his last day of high school.

And Derek said that he was going to keep his promise.

The two of them had never spoken of the blue raspberry Ring Pop engagement ring again, and Ian knew that things like destiny and fate only existed in fairy tales...but just for a moment, he let himself dream that Derek has been waiting....counting down the days until he could remind Ian that he had said “yes.”

Shawnee pulled up to the curb, her bright smile lighting up her face as she waved at Ian. He hurried down the front steps and hopped into the passenger seat, greeting her with a grin that mirrored her own.

"Hey, stranger," Shawnee said playfully. "Are you ready for our last day of high school ever?"

Ian nodded, his heart racing with a mix of emotions. "Yeah, I can't believe it's finally here."

"So did you decide if you're going to audition for that summer program at Interlochen?" Shawnee asked, turning down the radio. "Ms. Badino said they'd be stupid not to take you."

Ian shrugged, his fingers automatically tapping out the rhythm to "In The Mood" on his thigh. "I don't know. It's expensive, and Dad's still pushing for me to intern at the hospital this summer."

"Ian Mitchell, you are literally the only person who can riff on 'Round Midnight' without sounding like a dying cat. If you don't audition, I'm personally driving you there and throwing you on stage."

Ian laughed despite himself. Music was the one thing that was just his—not borrowed from Gavin, not compared to Isaac, not

overshadowed by his father's expectations. When he sang, he became someone else entirely—confident, electric, alive.

Shawnee bounced in her seat, grinning. "T-minus 24 hours until Ian Mitchell joins the adult world! No more kids' table for us, baby!" She paused, her smile turning mischievous. "Think they'll finally let you order off the grown-up menu?"

At least someone remembered, Ian thought bitterly. It's nice to know I'm not completely invisible.

Shawnee pulled away from the curb and started the familiar path towards Grosse Pointe High School. Morning sunlight filtered through the trees, creating that same kaleidoscope effect from his dream, as if the world itself was still shifting between fantasy and reality.

She fiddled with the car's tape deck, popping in a mix tape. The opening chords of Alanis Morissette's 'You Oughta Know' filled the car.

"God, I love this song," Shawnee said, turning up the volume.

Ian sat quietly and looked out the window thoughtfully.

"What's wrong?" Shawnee asked, lowering the volume, sensing his mood shift. Her eyes flicked between the road and his profile, concern evident in the furrow of her brow.

He sighed and looked at his best friend. "I think my parents are totally going to forget my birthday."

Shawnee's eyes widened in disbelief. "No way, Ian. You're turning eighteen! They have to remember something that big."

Ian forced a smile, but the uncertainty gnawed at him. "Yeah, you're probably right. I'm just being paranoid."

"And hey," Shawnee added, "at least Gwen will remember. That kid worships you."

Ian smiled, remembering Gwen's drawing. "Yeah, she's a sweet kid. I just hope she doesn't take after Isaac too much as she grows up."

"Ah, Isaac's not so bad," Shawnee said. "He's just... trying to figure himself out. Like we all are."

Ian nodded, realizing that perhaps he and Isaac weren't so different after all. Both of them struggling to meet expectations that felt impossible, just in different ways.

A comfortable silence settled between them for a moment before Shawnee cleared her throat with the particular delicacy she employed when she was about to say something she wasn't sure she should.

"So. Elliot asked me again last night why I was picking you up this morning instead of him driving me."

Ian turned from the window. "What did you tell him?"

"That you're my best friend and I've been driving you to school since sophomore year and that absolutely nothing about that has

changed." She said it lightly, but her fingers tightened slightly on the steering wheel. "He's just... you know how he gets."

Ian did know. Elliot had been quietly, persistently jealous of him for the better part of the year—the kind of jealousy that never quite surfaced into anything direct enough to confront, just a low hum of suspicion that followed the two of them like a weather system. It had always struck Ian as both flattering and exhausting, and faintly, privately absurd.

Though he supposed, from the outside, he could almost understand it. Shawnee and Ian had the kind of friendship that looked, to someone who didn't know better, like something else entirely. The easy shorthand, the shared tape decks, the way she could read his silences.

Ian looked out the window again, watching the familiar neighborhood scroll past, the sunlight still doing its kaleidoscope thing through the leaves.

After today, he thought, with a complicated twist of something he couldn't quite name, Elliot's jealousy should solve itself. Whatever Ian was—whatever he was finally, terrifyingly beginning to admit to himself—it wasn't a threat to Shawnee and Elliot. It never had been. Soon enough, that would be obvious to everyone.

The thought should have been a relief.

He was still deciding whether it was.

Ian's hands clenched at his sides, the words bubbling up in his throat: I'm gay. I'm gay and I'm terrified and I'm turning eighteen and does anyone even care?

But the familiar weight of expectation pressed down, sealing his lips.

Not yet.

But today.

Shawnee reached over and gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. "Don't worry, we'll make sure your birthday is unforgettable. Have you decided where you want to go tonight? At the stroke of midnight, you'll officially be an adult, and we can get in anywhere we please!"

"Shawnee, I've been wracking my brain for months!" His hands flew up in exasperation. "The thought of going to a packed dance club with the same old jocks and bimbos from school makes me want to scream. Can't we, along with Renee and Amelia, just snag some bottles of Boone's Farm and chill out at a secluded cemetery? It'll be the cool, unconventional thing to do."

Shawnee glances over at Ian, shocked, then puts her eyes back on the road.

Her jaw dropped in theatrical horror.

"Ian Mitchell. Happy fuckin' eighteenth birthday! Let's totally just do the exact same thing we did last year, and the year before that,

and the year before that!" Her voice dripped with sarcasm as she mimicked his tone.

"Because who needs originality when you can just relive your youth over and over again? NO! Not us four eighteen year olds! Tonight has to be unforgettable! I will not have it any other way."

"Okay, okay, okay! I'll keep thinking!" He shouted, unable to contain a laugh at her dramatics. "Can the four of us meet at the oak tree right after the final bell today? There's something I need to tell you guys, and it has to be right there...right then."

The oak tree had been their spot for four years, but today it would become the site of a confession that would change everything. Two confessions, actually. He'd tell them he was gay—that was the easy part, or at least the part he'd practiced. But then, if he could find the courage, he'd tell them about the exact moment he knew how different he was from the other boys.

Derek.

About a promise made over a Ring Pop thirteen years ago. About how he'd been five years old, and was still waiting for tomorrow to come even though Derek had long forgotten that promise had ever been made.

As he thought the words, his stomach clenched with both dread and anticipation.

Regardless, it was time to be true to himself.... Married to Derek or not.

Shawnee's eyes widened at Ian's urgency, but she nodded determinedly.

"Absolutely, we'll be there," she promised, her grip on the steering wheel tightening. "Ian," Shawnee said softly, her eyes briefly leaving the road to meet his, "you know you can tell me anything, right? Whatever's going on with you... it's okay."

The words of reassurance only made his stomach clench tighter. The sincerity in her voice was both comforting and terrifying—what if that acceptance changed once she knew the truth? Not just that he was gay, but that he'd been in love with the same person since he was five years old. That he'd built his entire heart around a childhood promise only one of them remembered.

She said that now, but would she mean it in a few hours? The oak tree loomed in his mind, its shadows stretching across his future like prison bars.

Or maybe wings.

Without thinking, Ian touched his lips. He could still taste it—blue raspberry from the dream. Sweet and nostalgic and aching. The phantom flavor of a promise Derek had made and forgotten, sealed with candy they'd shared while Superman saved the world on a television screen.

Ian's heart raced. For a moment, he considered spilling everything right there in Shawnee's car. The words pressed against his lips, desperate to be spoken. But the timing wasn't right—this wasn't just Shawnee's moment, but Renee and Amelia's too. They had been his sanctuary these past four years; they deserved to hear it together.

"I know," he managed. "It's just... have you ever felt like you're standing on the edge of something huge? Like everything's about to change?"

Shawnee nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, I guess that's what growing up feels like. Scary as hell, but kind of exciting too, right?"

"Right," Ian echoed, turning to look out the window. If only she knew just how scary and exciting it really was

Shawnee's eyes flashed with determination as she maneuvered her car through a tight gap in traffic.

"Don't worry, Ian," she said, noticing his white-knuckled grip on the door handle. "I've got this. And I've got you, no matter what happens today."

As they pulled into the high school parking lot, Ian felt a surge of gratitude for having friends like Shawnee, Renee, and Amelia by his side.

Shawnee parked her sedan in her usual parking spot, and they exited the car.

As he and Shawnee walked towards the front doors, groups of students were scattered across the lawn, some tossing football or a frisbee, others sitting on the steps chatting.

The sun was shining brightly in the sky, casting long shadows of trees across the lawn.

The overall atmosphere was bustling and lively, with a hint of nostalgia for the end of the school year approaching.

The bell rang, signaling they had fifteen minutes to get to their first period classes.

Their lockers were on separate wings of the school, so they exchanged a quick goodbye, promising to meet at the oak tree after school.

Ian made his way through the crowded hallway, the sound of chatter and laughter surrounding him.

He felt like he was moving in slow motion, his mind preoccupied with the weight of the secret he carried.

As he reached his locker, Ian spun the combination lock absentmindedly, the numbers blurring together in his mind.

Opening the metal door, he grabbed the books he needed for his first class, but his hands were shaking slightly.

Each tick of the hallway clock felt like a countdown - to freedom or disaster, he wasn't sure which.

The dream's lingering warmth battled with cold reality: Derek picking him up later, the oak tree confession, his eighteenth birthday tomorrow, the wedding next week.

Each moment a domino waiting to fall, and he'd set them all in motion.

He glanced down the hallway, taking in the familiar sights - a group of girls in babydoll dresses and chokers giggling over a folded note, a guy with frosted tips adjusting his pager on his belt clip.

A poster for last week's senior prom, which Ian didn't attend, promised a "Totally Rad Time."

"Hey, Mitchell!"

Ian's heart pounded in his chest and his stomach twisted into knots as he turned to see Mike Zender leaning casually against the row of lockers next to him.

The sight of Mike's familiar face brought a rush of memories flooding back—not just the torment and bullying of the past four years, but flashes from before: building forts in Mike's backyard, trading baseball cards, sleepovers where they'd stayed up watching scary movies they weren't supposed to see.

Before high school.

Before Mike joined football and started following Alex Hoffman around like a shadow.

Mike stepped closer to Ian, adjusting his backwards baseball cap. His Starter jacket swished as he leaned against the lockers, a smirk playing on his lips.

Something about the forced confidence in his stance reminded Ian of Isaac trying too hard to be tough.

"Oh hey, Mike," he said quietly, hoping this encounter would be brief.

The weightless feeling from his dream vanished, replaced by the heavy anchor of reality.

"You excited? We're finally outta here!" Mike said casually, but there was a predatory gleam in his eyes that set off alarm bells in Ian's mind. Yet beneath it, Ian noticed something else—the dark circles under Mike's eyes, the tight lines around his mouth that hadn't been there months ago.

Ian thought about what his father had mentioned last week over dinner—that Dr. Zender, Mike's father and one of the hospital's top heart surgeons, had been taking time off. That Mike's mother's cancer had progressed to stage four. The table had gone quiet then, and Ian had felt a pang of sympathy, remembering the woman who used to make them peanut butter and jelly sandwiches cut into dinosaur shapes.

"Yeah, I guess so," Ian responded, finding himself wanting to ask how Mike's mom was doing, the words hovering on his lips. But before he could speak, Mike's expression hardened.

"I can only imagine the relief you feel, not having to keep all your dick sucking and fudge packing a secret, huh? Too bad I won't be here to constantly remind you of what a pathetic sissy you are. It's truly disappointing."

Ian's heart sank as Mike's words cut deeper than any physical pain could have. His breath caught in his lungs, and for a moment, the hallway seemed to spin around him. The casual cruelty was all the more painful coming from someone who had once been a friend.

He tried to stay composed, but the familiar senses of fear and humiliation were overwhelming.

For a moment, Mike's gaze flickered past Ian to where Alex Hoffman stood watching from down the hall, and Ian caught something in Mike's expression—a desperate need for approval that made Ian's anger falter momentarily.

Ian clenched his jaw, forcing himself to meet Mike's gaze. "Wow, Mike. Did you stay up all night working on that material? It's almost as tired as your Starter jacket."

He paused, then added more quietly, "Some of us have actually grown since freshman year. And some of us haven't."

For a split second, something raw and vulnerable flashed across Mike's face—so quickly Ian almost thought he'd imagined it. A crack in the armor, a glimpse of the boy who used to climb trees with him before the world told them both who they were supposed to be.

"Whatever, Mitchell," Mike said, the usual venom in his voice sounding strangely hollow. He glanced down at his pager as it buzzed. His hand trembled slightly as he checked it, and Ian wondered if it was news about his mother.

Ian had tried reaching out when he first heard about Mrs. Zender—had even written a note that he'd carried in his backpack for three days before realizing he'd never find the right moment to give it to Mike. Not with the walls of high school politics between them, not with Alex Hoffman and the rest of the football team always hovering nearby.

As Mike walked away, Ian noticed how his shoulders hunched forward slightly, how his swagger seemed more performance than confidence. The familiar shame and anger swirled inside Ian, but this time, something else bubbled up too—a complicated mixture of pity, nostalgia for their lost friendship, and a strange relief that high school's artificial hierarchies would soon be behind them both.

From down the hall, Ms. Perez, his sophomore year English teacher, caught his eye. She'd witnessed the exchange, her expression making it clear she'd heard enough to understand. The silent acknowledgment in her nod made Ian feel both seen and exposed.

Ian ducked into the bathroom, needing a moment to compose himself.

He stared at his reflection in the mirror, really looking at himself.

His father's eyes, his mother's chin, but something uniquely his own in the set of his jaw, the furrow of his brow.

"Who are you?" he whispered to his reflection. The boy looking back at him seemed both familiar and strange.

He was no longer the child who needed Derek to reach the high shelves, nor was he the confident adult he hoped to become.

He was... in between.

Becoming.

Ian took a deep breath

Tonight, he would take the first step towards bridging that gap between who he was and who he wanted to be.

It was terrifying, yes, but also thrilling.

For the first time in a long while, he felt a smile tugging at his lips.

Whatever happened, at least it would be real. At least it would be him.

As Ian walked to his first class, he thought about the afternoon ahead and the conversations he would have with his friends at the oak tree.

He knew he had to tell them the truth, no matter how difficult it might be.

Little did he know just how much his world was about to turn upside down, or how the events of the next twenty-four hours would reshape his life forever...

2 – Everlasting Blue Balls

The morning sun streamed through the expansive windows of Derek Lawson's downtown Detroit loft, casting a warm glow over the eclectic space. Colorful Keith Haring prints adorned the walls, their vibrant energy a stark contrast to the peaceful silence of the early hour. In one corner, a vintage jukebox stood sentinel, while shelves lined with vinyl records and well-worn paperbacks hinted at the owner's passion for music and literature.

The loft was a perfect reflection of Derek himself - creative, welcoming, and unapologetically unique. From the mix of vintage and modern furniture to the strings of fairy lights draped across the ceiling, every element spoke of a life lived with intention and flair.

In the quietest corner of the room, far from the bustle of the city visible through the windows, Derek lay tangled in the sheets of his king-sized bed. His muscular arm was draped over a blonde man a few years his junior, both of them lost in peaceful slumber. Derek's black hair fell across his devastatingly handsome face, a stark contrast to the fair skin of his bed partner.

The shrill ring of a phone shattered the tranquil scene. Derek's eyes flew open, revealing a striking shade of blue that seemed to glow in the morning light. For a moment, confusion clouded his features as he took in the unfamiliar form beside him. Then, with a start, he jerked away, fumbling for the chunky cordless phone on his nightstand. As he reached for it, his hand knocked against his pager, sending it clattering to the floor.

"Shit," he whispered, as he grabbed the phone and hit 'talk.'
"Hello?" Derek answered, his voice still thick with sleep.

"Morning," came Gavin's tense reply

Derek couldn't help but smile at his friend's tone, the familiar sound of Gavin in crisis mode bringing with it the comfort of their long friendship.

"Well, good morning!" he replied cheerfully, sitting up in bed. As he did, he remembered the sleeping form next to him and lowered his voice. "What's up, Gav?"

"Derek," Gavin growled, his voice tight with frustration, "I said 'morning,' not 'good morning.' Trust me, there's nothing good about this clusterfuck of a day."

A sudden chill ran down Derek's spine, goosebumps rising on his bare arms. Something in Gavin's tone suggested this week might test their friendship in unexpected ways. Derek shook off the feeling, attributing it to the previous night's haze and the disorientation of waking up beside a stranger.

Derek's smile faded as he swung his legs over the side of the bed, planting his feet on the cool floor. The contrast between the warm

sheets and the chilly hardwood sent a jolt through his system, fully awakening him. "Shit, Gavin, what's wrong? What happened?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line before Gavin spoke again. "Were you aware that when a woman starts taking birth control, it does all sorts of crazy things to her menstrual cycle?"

Derek blinked, surprised by the question. "What? No!" He glanced at the still-sleeping man in his bed and lowered his voice further, cupping his hand around the receiver. "No, I had no clue about any of that. Why would I know about that? Why are birth control and menstrual cycles making your morning so bad?"

Gavin's frustration was palpable even through the phone. "Why are you being so quiet? Do you have someone there with you?" There was a brief pause before Gavin continued, his voice rising. Gavin let out a sardonic laugh. "Man, you've got it made! No surprise periods, no pregnancy scares... it's like an all-you-can-eat buffet without the bill at the end. Meanwhile, I'm over here playing reproductive roulette!"

Derek's face scrunched up in confusion and annoyance. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that you gay guys have it so easy," Gavin continued, his words tumbling out in a rush. "You can just... you know... take care of each other without all the added complications. No blood! No accidental babies!"

"Whoa, hold up, Gav," Derek cut in, his tone a mix of amusement and exasperation. "It's not all rainbows and unicorns on this side of the fence. We've got our own... let's call them 'logistical challenges.' Trust me, it's not always smooth sailing." He let out a coarse laugh. "I mean, I'm not sure what's worse... blood or shit on my dick." He paused, suddenly confused. "Wait! Why are we talking about this at ten in the morning?"

Gavin ignored the question, plowing on with his rant. "Seriously, you gays don't have to worry about any of that. It's us straight guys that have to!"

Derek couldn't help but chuckle at his friend's melodramatic tone. "Gavin, are you going to tell me what this is about?"

Gavin's voice rose in pitch, bordering on hysterical.

"Six months, Derek! Six. *Fucking*. Months. I've been stuck on third base so long, I'm growing roots. And now *this*?! After we got engaged a year ago, Hillary made me *promise* we cut off all sex six months before our wedding night. I have one week to go... I could almost taste it... and then Hillary calls me this morning and says she screwed up! She started taking birth control! She timed it wrong or something, so her cycle went rogue, and now she's gonna be surfing the crimson wave throughout the entire honeymoon in Cancun!" Gavin's voice cracked with frustration. "I'm telling you, Derek, it's like the *universe* is cockblocking me! One week from the big leagues, and

suddenly I'm back in Little League with the world's *worst* case of blue balls! They're going to explode!"

Derek burst into laughter, unable to contain himself any longer. His shoulders shook as he tried to stifle the sound, conscious of his sleeping guest.

"Oh, you think this is funny?" Gavin's indignant voice crackled through the phone. "I'm glad you find my everlasting blue balls so hilarious!"

Derek fell back onto his bed, overcome with mirth. "I'm *sorry*, Gavin!" he managed between laughs. "I know how much you've been looking forward to this. But come on, man... you have to take a chill pill, and admit it's a *little* funny."

There was silence on the other end for a moment, and then Derek heard Gavin's deep chuckle join in. Soon, they were both howling with laughter, the tension dissolving as quickly as it had appeared.

Derek wiped away his tears of laughter, gasping for breath. "Gavin, you never fail to amaze me. Don't worry, buddy, everything will be fine. You've got the love of your life waiting for you and a *lifetime* ahead to get down and dirty with her."

"Yeah, yeah," Gavin let out a heavy sigh. "I guess I'll have to deal with *that* later. Right now, I just need to survive this wedding week."

"Do you remember when we were kids and you would freak out over every little thing? But I was always there to calm you down," Derek reminisced, his voice softening with the warmth of shared history. "Looks like some things never change. But hey, you've got this. You always do."

Gavin sighed, and Derek could almost see him nodding on the other end of the line. "You're right, man. This is just a small hiccup."

"That's the spirit!" Derek cheered. "And in one week, you'll be a married man! Moving on with your life, it's insane! Amazing! Beautiful! But mostly insane!"

"I have a feeling the next seven days are going to be filled with chaos and craziness," Gavin said with a nervous laugh. "Are you ready to join me on this wild ride?"

"Always, Let's do this!" Derek chuckled, his voice warm with affection. "Listen, you drama queen. We've been through nineteen years of your shenanigans. What's one more week? Besides, after the 'I do's, it's Hillary's job to keep you in line. I'm just here for the home stretch and the open bar."

They both laughed again, the tension from earlier completely dissipated.

"Alright, let's get this show on the road," Gavin said. "You haven't forgotten that we're picking up Ian from school today and going to get fitted for our tuxes, right?"

"I have *not* forgotten," Derek nodded, standing up. "And I am looking forward to it!"

The mention of Ian's name sent an unexpected flutter through his chest. A sudden image of Ian flashed through his mind - the last time he'd seen him, about six months ago. Back then, Ian had been just a gangly teenager with a shy smile and those thoughtful green eyes that seemed to see right through Derek's carefully constructed facade.

He wondered how much the kid had changed in the months since their last meeting. Had his voice deepened further? Had he finally grown into those long limbs? The curiosity caught Derek off guard, and he quickly brushed it aside.

"Let me get rid of... whoever *this* is... And, I'm gonna get in the shower, get dressed, and head over to your place. Let's go get something to eat, then just hang out until we gotta go get Ian."

"Sounds good," Gavin replied. "And hey... thanks for listening to my meltdown. You're a good friend, Derek."

Derek smiled softly, the sincerity in Gavin's voice warming him more than any sunlight could. "Anytime, man. That's what I'm here for. See you soon."

As he hung up the phone, Derek's gaze drifted to the sleeping stranger in his bed. The events of the previous night were a blur of pulsing music, strong drinks, and heated touches in dark corners. A familiar sense of emptiness settled in his chest. These encounters, once thrilling, now left him feeling hollow.

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In Gavin and Hillary's Grosse Pointe home, as he hung up with Derek, Gavin sank onto the couch, his mind whirling. The wedding was just days away, and suddenly he felt overwhelmed. He loved Hillary, no doubt about that, but was he ready for this lifelong commitment? He thought about his parents' marriage - solid, dependable, but sometimes lacking in passion. Is that what he wanted? Or did he crave something more? He shook his head, trying to dispel the doubts. This was just pre-wedding jitters, nothing more.

As he waited for Derek to arrive, Gavin rummaged through his closet to find something suitable to wear. He spotted his old high school jacket and smiled, remembering the countless memories he had made with Derek over the years. He pulled it from its hanger, the leather cool against his fingers, and slipped it on, feeling a familiar sense of nostalgia and comfort wash over him.

Gavin caught his reflection in the mirror. At 5'11", his athletic build filled out the leather in a way it never had during his teenage years. The jacket hugged his broad shoulders and tapered down to his trim waist, evidence of his continued dedication to staying fit.

His sandy blonde hair, now cut short and styled neatly, was a far cry from the floppy mop of his youth. A few strands fell across his forehead, softening his otherwise mature features. His green eyes, reminiscent of sun-dappled forest leaves, crinkled at the corners as he smiled at his reflection.

A light dusting of freckles across the bridge of his nose added a touch of boyish charm, contrasting with his now-chiseled jawline. A day's worth of stubble shadowed his cheeks and chin, giving him a rugged edge that balanced out the preppy look of the letterman jacket.

As he zipped up the jacket, the muscles in his forearms flexed. His large, capable hands smoothed down the front, fingers tracing the embroidered school mascot. Gavin's full lips often quirked in a lopsided grin, now pressed together in a moment of nostalgia.

Standing there, Gavin cut a striking figure - the boy he had been and the man he'd become merging in that moment, creating a complex portrait of youthful energy and mature responsibility.

His gaze drifted to the photo album on his dresser, filled with pictures of Hillary and him through the years. As he flipped through the pages, the progression of their relationship unfolded before him - from awkward high school dates to the confident couple they were now.

Warmth spread through his chest as he looked at Hillary's radiant smile in their engagement photos. He knew in his heart that he was marrying the right person. She was his soulmate, and he couldn't imagine spending the rest of his life with anyone else.

He smiled, knowing that the next week would be filled with excitement, laughs, and countless memories with Derek and the rest of his friends and family. And, of course, a little chaos and craziness, as he had said. He could only hope that the wedding day itself would be as perfect as the life he was about to embark on with his one true love.

*** * ***

Derek stood by the window of his loft, his reflection superimposed over the Detroit skyline. The juxtaposition of his brooding figure against the bustling city below seemed to underscore his sudden melancholy.

"Gav's *always* been there," he thought, running a hand through his disheveled hair. "Even when my own world was falling apart. I owe him everything."

His thoughts drifted to the horizon, where the morning sun painted the clouds in hues of gold and pink. The city was waking up, full of life and movement, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something was quietly shifting in his own life, like a storm gathering on a distant skyline.

His chest tightened with conflicting emotions. The excitement for Gavin's happiness mingled with an undercurrent of something deeper - not quite jealousy, but a yearning for the certainty and acceptance that seemed to come so easily to his best friend.

Would there still be room for him in Gavin's new life? The question snaked its way into his mind, unwelcome but persistent. Derek shook his head, trying to dispel the thought. This was Gavin's moment, and he'd be damned if he let his own insecurities cast a shadow on it.

An unexpected flutter of anticipation pulsed through him at the thought of seeing Ian later. It had been a while since he'd seen Gavin's little brother — long enough, he supposed, for the boy to have grown into something else entirely.

Long enough for everything to have changed.

He wondered, with a quiet and resigned sort of ache, whether the adoration Ian used to carry for him so openly — that wide-eyed, Superman-worthy worship that had once made Derek feel like he was capable of being someone worth looking up to — had finally faded.

And why wouldn't it have?

Ian was graduating now, stepping over the threshold into adulthood with his whole luminous life stretching out before him. He didn't need heroes anymore. Especially not broken ones.

Especially not Derek.

Because if Ian looked closely enough — and he would, eventually, because the young always did — he would see the truth of it.

The wreckage Derek had made of his own heart, and the hearts of others.

The soul-hollowing breakup that still lived in his chest like a wound that refused to close. And the shameful pattern that had followed in its wake — a different boy in his bed nearly every night, warm and temporary, because warmth was the only thing he could still bring himself to reach for. And then morning would come, grey and unforgiving, and he would need them gone.

Quickly.

Quietly.

Before he made the catastrophic mistake of feeling something again.

The sensation caught him off guard, and he pushed it aside, attributing it to the general excitement of the wedding preparations.

Little did he know, that small flutter was the beginning of something that would change everything.

As he stood lost in thought, Derek's mind drifted back to their sophomore year on the football field. The memory materialized with cinematic clarity - a crisp autumn afternoon, the game tied, the crowd a roaring sea of school colors. Gavin, with his usual determination, had

executed a perfect play, passing the football to Derek in a moment that seemed to slow time.

"This is *it*, Lawson," Gavin had shouted, grinning. Derek, fueled by their unspoken bond, had caught the ball and sprinted to score the winning touchdown. The memory of Gavin's exuberant hug afterward, both sweaty and victorious, was one of pure camaraderie and joy - a testament to a friendship that had withstood the test of time.

Derek stretched his muscles, the movement pulling him back to the present. As he ran a hand through his disheveled hair, his gaze fell on the dresser across the room. A small rainbow pride flag hung from the mirror, a quiet statement of identity. Alongside it stood an array of sports trophies, superhero toys, and expensive cologne bottles, a testament to his varied interests.

Beside the cologne bottles sat a small wooden box, its lid slightly askew. Derek made a mental note to go through it later—he was pretty sure his good cufflinks were buried in there somewhere among the ticket stubs, old baseball cards, and other random keepsakes from high school. He'd need them for the wedding. The box had become a catch-all for things he couldn't quite throw away but didn't need on display: championship medals, a pressed corsage from prom, that signed baseball from Little League. He should really organize it one of these days.

Three framed photographs caught his attention. The first showed him and Gavin at their high school graduation, arms slung around each other's shoulders, grins splitting their faces in their cap and gown. The second captured them in their football uniforms at their senior homecoming game, flush with victory. The third photo gave him pause - it was of him, Gavin, Gavin's fiancée Hillary, and... Derek's ex-boyfriend, whose face had been angrily scribbled out with black marker.

As he gazed at the photo of them at their high school graduation, a pang of nostalgia hit him hard. The ache spread through his chest, a physical reminder of time's passage. He could almost smell the freshly cut grass of the football field, hear the cheers of the crowd, feel the weight of possibilities that had stretched before them that day.

"Things are really changing, aren't they?" he murmured to himself. The thought of Gavin starting this new chapter of his life filled Derek with a bittersweet mix of joy and melancholy. Would there still be room for him in Gavin's new life? Late-night beer and pizza sessions, spontaneous road trips, inside jokes that only they understood - would all of that fade away?

He shook his head, trying to dispel the selfish thoughts. This was Gavin's moment, and he'd be damned if he let his own insecurities cast a shadow on it. Still, he couldn't help but feel a twinge of envy. Gavin had found his person, his happily-ever-after. Meanwhile, Derek's

love life was a revolving door of casual encounters and failed relationships.

A gentle, nostalgic smile tugged at the corners of Derek's mouth as he thought back to the day Hillary had convinced them to audition for the jazz choir. They had been hesitant at first, more accustomed to performing on the field than on a stage, but Hillary's infectious enthusiasm had won them over.

Amongst the group was an all-girl doo-wop ensemble called "Ladies Only," and for years Ms. Badino had tried to assemble an all-male counterpart, but without success - until Derek and Gavin joined the jazz choir and sparked newfound interest among other boys.

Ms. Badino, the renowned choir director, had initially regarded them with skepticism, her eyes narrowing as she took in the two jocks standing awkwardly before her, asking to sign up for an audition.

Suddenly, there were thirty names signed up on the audition list.

Derek and Gavin had made it that year and every year until graduation...

"Take Five" was born, and Derek found a new outlet in music which gave him a sense of satisfaction that no sport could replicate. But it gave him something else too — something he hadn't anticipated. Something that had nothing to do with trophies.

It gave him a world.

The overnight competitions were nothing like football away games. Football travel was all testosterone and chest-pounding and coaches barking from the front of the bus. But choir trips — choir trips were something else entirely.

Ms. Badino would load them into vans and carry them off to other cities, other auditoriums, other schools, and Derek had quickly discovered that those gleaming, marble-floored competition halls were populated with an endless, glorious parade of beautiful boys.

Pretty choir boys, it turned out, had a *very* particular appreciation for a six-foot-two quarterback who could also break your heart with a tenor note. They would appear from every corner — from prep schools and parochial schools and arts academies — and they would find him. Or *he* would find *them*. It hardly mattered which.

He remembered one in particular.

Gorgeous in the effortless, almost irritating way that only certain boys managed to be — blonde, bright-eyed, wearing the navy blazer of one of the Catholic school choirs. His name started with a C and ended in sin. Corey, maybe. Or Caleb. Casey, perhaps. It didn't matter what his mother had written on his birth certificate because Derek had mostly thought of him as trouble from the moment he'd smiled at him across the warm-up room.

Between rounds, Trouble had convinced him to take a walk.

He had almost missed the final performance entirely.

They had been tucked into a utility closet somewhere in the labyrinthine back corridors of the competition hall — Derek leaning against a shelf of cleaning supplies, eyes closed, the blonde boy on his knees, when he heard it. The unmistakable, precise, purposeful clack of Ms. Badino's heels on the corridor floor. That woman walked like a metronome and he had learned to fear that sound.

He had the boy on his feet and his zipper closed in approximately four seconds — a personal record — and the door swung open to reveal Ms. Badino in all her immaculate, unflappable glory, her reading glasses pushed up into her dark hair, her eyes taking in the scene with the calm efficiency of a woman who had been chaperoning teenage boys for twenty years and had long since stopped being surprised by anything they did.

"Derek," she said, with a precision that could have cut glass. "You're on in five minutes."

She turned on her heel and began walking away, her voice floating back over her shoulder like an afterthought. "Save your celebrations until after we win the gold."

He had made it to the wings just in time, falling into formation beside Gavin and Steve and Barry and Danny, his heart still hammering, his collar slightly askew. And then the lights had found them, and the music had swelled, and somehow — as it always did — everything else fell away.

He performed his solo, "Since I Don't Have You" originally by The Skyliners. That aching, yearning melody that Ms. Badino had chosen for him with her unfailing instinct, and somewhere in the middle of it he found the blonde boy in the crowd, that beautiful C-named disaster standing with his own choir in the audience, and Derek sang directly to him, holding his gaze, and felt the song move through him like something true.

They won the gold. Best performance. Best all-male group. The applause was thunderous, and Gavin's face was incandescent with pride and joy.

And that night, in the hotel, Ms. Badino's door remained conspicuously closed as Derek slipped down the corridor to find his pretty blonde boy and celebrate properly.

What followed was a night Derek would remember with considerable fondness — warm and stolen and sweet in the particular way that things are sweet when they exist entirely outside of ordinary life, belonging to no city and no morning and no consequence. Or so he had thought.

Because the blonde boy — Corey, Caleb, Casey, whatever his name was — had apparently felt something considerably more significant than a pleasant interlude between competition rounds. By

the following morning he had found Derek's phone number through means that remained a mystery to this day, and the calls had begun arriving with an enthusiasm that Derek had to admit, initially flattering, then mildly alarming, then genuinely exhausting.

"You were incredible last night. Both times. And then, three hours later:"

"I keep thinking about you."

And then, by Sunday evening:

"Do you believe in soulmates?"

It was Gavin who had finally intervened, plucking the phone from Derek's hand with the calm authority of someone who had grown very tired of watching his best friend make wide helpless eyes while "C" gabbed on and on.

He had walked out of the room and said something that was brief, kind, unambiguous, and final, handed the phone back without a word, and returned to his sandwich.

Derek had stared at him. "What did you say?"

"I said you were flattered, you weren't looking for anything serious, and that he deserved someone who could give him what he was looking for." Gavin had taken a bite of his sandwich. "Which *you* cannot."

"That's—" Derek had started.

"*True*," Gavin had said simply. "Pack a bag. You're staying the weekend at *my* house."

The calls had stopped. Derek had felt, inexplicably and briefly, the faintest sting of something he refused to examine too closely — not because he wanted the boy back, but because Gavin had been so effortlessly, accurately, devastatingly right about him.

Even then, at seventeen, Gavin had known him better than he knew himself.

Some things, it seemed, never changed. That first year it had been Derek, Gavin, Steve, Barry, and Danny in Take Five.

Those rehearsals had become a sanctuary for them, a place where their voices blended together seamlessly like colors on a canvas. Under Ms. Badino's guidance and mentorship, they had competed in state competitions for three consecutive years and brought home first place each time. But their senior year was undoubtedly the best — standing together on stage, basking in the spotlight and feeling invincible as they performed flawlessly.

The applause from the audience had been thunderous, but it was Gavin's radiant smile and unmistakable pride shining in his eyes that truly made the victory sweet. And that night they celebrated with pizza and laughter, their bond as strong as ever before.

Derek ran a hand through his hair, sighing at his reflection. "Time to put on your big boy pants, Lawson," he muttered. "High school

is long gone. Can't be the eternal wingman forever." His gaze flickered to the defaced photo, a wry smile tugging at his lips.

His eyes landed on that scribbled-out face, and his stomach clenched. The memory of Blake stung, a physical reminder of why he kept his heart guarded. But seeing Gavin so happy, so sure of his love for Hillary, made Derek wonder if he was missing out on something profound.

These memories were a tapestry of their friendship, woven together by shared experiences, triumphs, and unwavering support. Derek knew that no matter what changes lay ahead, the foundation of their friendship was unshakeable.

Before he could dwell further on the past, he focused his attention on the sleeping form beside him. The events of the previous night were a blur, but he couldn't deny the attractiveness of the naked young man in his bed. With a sigh, he gently placed a hand on the stranger's shoulder, giving it a light shake

"Uh... hey, buddy," Derek said softly, wincing at his own awkwardness. "You should probably get going. I've got to head out."

The young man stirred, his brown eyes blinking open slowly. Confusion flickered across his face as he took in the unfamiliar surroundings before his gaze settled on Derek. Recognition dawned, and a slow smile spread across his lips.

"Derek?" he mumbled, voice still thick with sleep. "What... what happened?"

Derek ran a hand through his hair, a nervous habit he'd never quite shaken. "Sorry, man. I have to go. My friend needs me for some wedding stuff. *I hate* to rush you, but..."

"Oh, right. Best man duties and all that," the young man nodded, sitting up. The blanket fell away, revealing a lean, toned chest that Derek couldn't help but appreciate. "Sorry, I didn't mean to overstay my welcome."

Derek nodded awkwardly. "No worries."

As the young man dressed, Derek busied himself in the bathroom, hoping to avoid any more awkward conversation. He braced his hands on the sink, leaning forward to examine his reflection in the mirror.

At 6'4", Derek's shirtless form dominated the small bathroom space. His muscular frame was a testament to years of dedicated athleticism, each well-defined muscle a sculpture of hard work and discipline. Broad shoulders tapered down to a narrow waist, creating a V-shape that would make any fitness model envious. His chest, powerful and sculpted, rose and fell with each deep breath he took.

Derek ran a hand through his jet-black hair. It was just long enough to be styled into a casual disarray that somehow looked both

effortless and deliberate. A few errant strands fell across his forehead, drawing attention to his most striking feature—his eyes.

Those eyes, a shade of blue so clear and intense they seemed almost otherworldly, stared back at him from the mirror. Framed by long, dark lashes, they held a depth that hinted at a complex inner world behind his confident exterior.

His face was a study in classical proportions—high cheekbones, a strong jawline, and full lips that often quirked into a charming half-smile. It was a face that turned heads wherever he went, earning him the label of "devastatingly handsome" more times than he cared to count.

Despite his Adonis-like appearance, there was a modesty in Derek's bearing. He didn't preen or posture in front of the mirror. Instead, he gave himself a small, almost self-deprecating smile, as if his own good looks somewhat bemused him.

With a final glance at his reflection, Derek straightened up, his impressive height causing him to duck slightly under the bathroom's low doorframe. He took a deep breath, squaring his shoulders as he prepared to face the awkwardness waiting on the other side of the door.

As he emerged, he found his guest leaning against the couch, a knowing smirk on his face.

"You... you don't remember my name, do you?" the young man asked.

Derek felt the heat rise to his cheeks, a flush spreading from his neck to the tips of his ears. "What? Of *course*, I do!" The lie was transparent, and they both knew it.

After a moment of painful silence, Derek threw up his hands in defeat, the motion betraying his embarrassment.

The young man chuckled. "It's Jeremy."

"*Jeremy!* Of course!" Derek blurted, wincing at his own transparent lie. He fumbled with his t-shirt, nearly putting it on backwards in his haste. "Jeremy. Jer. The *Jer*-man. How could I forget?"

He cringed inwardly.

The Jer-man?

Really, Lawson?

Jeremy's eyes roamed appreciatively over Derek's form. "Well, maybe *next* time you'll remember."

Derek laughed nervously and walked to the big metal sliding door that led out of his loft. "Yeah, maybe next time... Sorry, I'm not usually like this. The whole one-night stand thing isn't really my style."

A flash of disappointment crossed Jeremy's face, but he covered it quickly with a grin. "For what it's worth... I had a *fantastic* time."

Before Derek could respond, Jeremy closed the distance between them, placing a hand boldly on Derek's crotch. Derek tensed,

surprised by the forwardness, his muscles going rigid under the unexpected touch.

Jeremy traced a finger along Derek's jaw, his voice a sultry whisper. "How about we make this a regular thing? I promise I'll make it worth your while..." He leaned in, his lips barely brushing Derek's ear, his breath warm against Derek's skin.

Derek pulled away, discomfort clear in his body language. "Perhaps... but now I have all this wedding shit. So. *Right*. Well, be safe," he said, opening the door with perhaps a bit too much eagerness.

As Jeremy sauntered out, throwing one last wink over his shoulder, Derek closed the door and leaned against it, letting out a long breath.

"Mental note," he muttered to himself, "no more one-night stands. They *always* lead to disastrously awkward mornings after."

With a deep breath, he prepared to face the day. Whatever complicated emotions he was feeling, he'd push them aside. Gavin needed him, and he'd be there, just like always.

He shook his head, trying to clear the awkwardness of the encounter from his mind. As he headed to the bathroom for a much-needed shower, he couldn't help but burst into laughter.

"Everlasting blue balls!" he chortled, Gavin's earlier lament echoing in his mind.

The sound of his laughter filled the loft, chasing away the last vestiges of the morning's awkwardness and setting a lighter tone for the day ahead.

Sighing, he glanced at his Yamaha PSR-510 electric keyboard. The blank document propped up on the stand mocked him - he was supposed to be writing a jingle for a new energy drink, but inspiration eluded him. How could he capture the essence of vitality and excitement when he felt so conflicted inside? He hummed a few notes, jotting down lyrics about unleashing your true self. The irony wasn't lost on him. He got up, overwhelmed by the gulf between the enthusiasm he needed to convey and the uncertainty brewing within him.

He threw on a pair of acid-washed jeans and a faded 'The Cure' t-shirt from their recent 'Wild Mood Swings' tour. He flicked on his boombox, and the opening chords of TLC's 'Waterfalls' filled the room.

As he laced up his well-worn Doc Martens, he found himself humming along under his breath. 'They sure play this song a lot,' he thought to himself, tying the laces with practiced ease.

As he grabbed his keys, his gaze fell on the rainbow flag by his mirror, a reminder of the day he'd come out at sixteen. The corners were slightly frayed now, battle scars from years of being his silent statement to the world.

The memory of his parents' rejection still cut deep, a wound that had never fully healed. Their faces, twisted with disgust and

disappointment, were etched into his mind. His father's words - "*No son of mine*" - still echoed in his darkest moments.

But what stood out more vividly was Gavin's unwavering support. While Derek's world crumbled around him, Gavin had stood like a lighthouse in the storm, his presence a beacon of acceptance when Derek needed it most.

"You're my brother, Derek," Gavin had said, his voice firm and eyes fierce with loyalty. The Mitchells had opened their home to him without hesitation, and for the first time, Derek had felt the warmth of unconditional acceptance.

Derek remembered the first night at the Mitchells', lying awake in the unfamiliar guest room, afraid of being a burden. The ceiling had seemed to press down on him, the weight of his new reality making it hard to breathe. Just when the darkness felt overwhelming, Gavin had snuck into the room, his silhouette in the doorway a familiar comfort.

"You're family, Derek," Gavin had whispered, perching on the edge of the bed. "You never have to worry about having nowhere to go. Don't ever forget that."

It was a simple gesture, but it had meant the world to him, anchoring him when everything else was adrift.

Those months living with the Mitchells had cemented their friendship into something like family. In the kitchen, Graham Mitchell had taught him how to change the oil in a car. In the living room, Imogen had included him in family game nights as if he'd always been there. And in the backyard, young Ian had looked up at him with those curious green eyes, bombarding him with questions about everything from football to stars, his innocence a balm for Derek's wounded spirit.

But the smile faded as quickly as it had appeared. In just a week, Gavin would be married, embraced by society in a way that Derek, as a gay man in the 90s, could only dream of. The weight of that inequality settled heavily on his shoulders, a physical burden that made his movements slower, more deliberate.

Derek caught his reflection in the mirror, his brow furrowed into deep lines that aged him beyond his years. "Get it together, Lawson," he muttered, forcing his features to relax. "Today's about Gavin, not *your* pity party."

But even as he said it, he couldn't shake the feeling of being left behind. Gavin was stepping into a future filled with societal approval and support - wedding announcements in the paper, joint bank accounts, children, a house with a white picket fence. The American Dream, served on a silver platter.

And where did that leave Derek? Forever the best man, never the groom?

He took a deep breath, straightening his shoulders as if physically shrugging off the weight of his thoughts. He was Gavin's best

man, his best friend. Whatever complicated emotions he was feeling, he'd push them aside. Gavin needed him, and he'd be there, just like always.

Suddenly, there was a sharp knock at the door that halted him in his tracks.

Thinking it was Jeremy claiming to "forget something," he opened it without checking, only to find himself face-to-face with his ex-boyfriend, Blake.

The air between them crackled with unresolved tension. Derek's breath caught in his throat, and his heart hammered against his ribs as memories flooded back, causing him to take a step back instinctively.

Blake looked like he'd been worn down to his foundation. Deep shadows pooled under his eyes—not just from one sleepless night, but from weeks of them strung together. His once bright brown eyes were dull and red-rimmed, the kind of exhaustion that came from crying and drinking in equal measure. His hair, usually meticulously styled with an excessive amount of L.A. Looks hair gel, hung limp and unwashed, strands falling across his forehead like they'd given up trying.

He was thinner too—not fit thin, but the kind of gaunt that suggested meals forgotten and calories replaced with alcohol.

Derek's heart skipped a beat at the sight of him, not from longing but from recognition. This was what their breakup had done. This was the damage he'd left in his wake.

"Why are you here, Blake?" Derek's voice came out steadier than he felt, his hands curling into fists at his sides.

Blake's eyes swept the loft—not with nostalgia, but with something closer to grief. His gaze caught on the record player, and his voice came out raw and small. "You still have our jukebox." It wasn't an observation. It was an accusation wrapped in heartbreak. "I thought... after everything... you would've gotten rid of it. Gotten rid of all of me."

Derek closed the door quietly, not wanting his neighbors to witness whatever this was about to become. "Blake, you're drunk. You shouldn't be here."

"Where else am I supposed to be?" Blake's voice cracked, the words tumbling out before he could stop them. "You were supposed to be my home, Derek. You said I was safe with you. You said you'd never leave like everyone else did."

Derek's jaw tightened. "That was before—"

"Before I fucked it up?" Blake laughed, but the sound was hollow, brittle. "Yeah. I know. Believe me, I know exactly when I destroyed us. I replay it every night." He fumbled with a flask from his pocket, his fingers trembling. "May 14th. 2:47 AM. The Gunberry twins. That's when you decided I wasn't worth fighting for anymore."

"You made that choice, Blake. Not me."

"Did I?" Blake's eyes flashed, but underneath the anger was something desperate. "I was twenty-one years old, Derek. My mom was dying. The hospital bills were crushing us. And you—" His voice broke. "You had your nice little job at the ad agency. Your trust fund from when you turned eighteen. Your loft. You didn't understand what it was like to watch your mother waste away because you couldn't afford better treatment."

Derek's stomach tightened. "I offered to help—"

"I didn't want your money!" Blake's shout echoed in the loft before dropping to a whisper. "I wanted you to understand why I had to do it. One weekend. Ten thousand dollars. That was four months of treatment, Derek. Four months of keeping her alive." His hands shook as he raised the flask. "You looked at me like I was dirty. Like I'd betrayed you. But I was trying to save her."

"It wasn't just once, Blake. It wasn't just the Gunberrys."

Blake's face crumpled. "I know. God, don't you think I know? After Mom died, I didn't know how to stop. The director kept calling. The money kept coming. And you were pulling away, looking at me like I was something shameful." He took a drink, winced. "So I kept going. Because if you already saw me as a whore, what was the point in trying to be anything else?"

Derek felt the familiar weight of guilt settling in his chest—Blake's specialty, making Derek feel complicit in his self-destruction. "You could've stopped. I waited for you to stop."

"You waited?" Blake's laugh was sharp, cruel. "You left, Derek. You packed your shit and walked out while I was on set. Didn't even have the guts to tell me to my face." His voice dropped, vulnerable again. "I came home to an empty apartment and a note that said 'I deserve better than this.' Like I was garbage you were throwing out."

"That's not—" Derek started, but Blake cut him off.

"That's exactly what it was." Blake's eyes were glassy now, tears threatening to spill. "You promised me you'd never leave. You said I was the only one who saw the real you. You said—" His voice broke completely. "You said when this country got its head out of its ass, I was the first person you'd propose to."

The words hit Derek like a physical blow. He had said that. Late one night, wrapped around each other after sex, talking about impossible futures. He'd meant it at the time.

"Blake..."

"No." Blake held up a hand. "You don't get to 'Blake' me. You made promises. You said you loved me exactly as I was. That I didn't have to be perfect." He laughed bitterly. "But the second I started falling apart, you couldn't run fast enough."

"You cheated on me," Derek said, his voice hard. "Multiple times."

"For money to save my dying mother!" Blake's voice cracked again. "And yeah, after she died, I kept doing it because I didn't know who I was without the cameras. Without the validation." He wiped his eyes roughly. "You were supposed to help me figure it out. You said you'd be there through anything."

"I wasn't just on set, Blake. Seriously, I know the truth. Stop lying. I was there. For two years, I was there. Through the drinking, the lying, the disappearing for days—"

"But not through the worst of it," Blake said quietly. "Not when I needed you most. You loved the idea of saving me, Derek. But when I actually needed saving, you decided I wasn't worth the effort."

The silence stretched between them, heavy with accusation.

Blake's voice dropped to barely above a whisper. "I saw him leave this morning. Young. Pretty. Fresh." His eyes met Derek's, and the pain there was raw and real. "That's what you wanted all along, wasn't it? Someone who didn't come with baggage. Someone you could mold into exactly what you needed."

"That's not—"

"Isn't it?" Blake took a step closer. "You're already replacing me with someone who doesn't require fixing. Someone who doesn't wake up shaking. Someone who doesn't remind you that love is messy and hard and sometimes it means watching someone struggle." His voice broke. "Someone who isn't me."

"I'm just fucking, Blake. Because I get lonely at night. Not that I owe you any explanation!" Derek shouted. "None of them mean anything..."

"Because they're not me?"

Derek sighed, "Honestly, Blake... Nothing makes me happier that none of them are you. I never want you touching me again."

"Wow," Blake sighed walking towards the door. "Everyone's getting some of that dick but me."

Derek's chest tightened. "You need help, Blake. Professional help. I can't—"

"Can't what? Save me?" Blake laughed, the sound wet with tears. "I'm not asking you to save me, Derek. I'm asking you to remember that you promised you would. That you looked me in the eyes and said you'd never give up on me." He moved closer, and Derek could smell the whiskey on his breath, the unwashed scent of someone who'd stopped caring. "Do you have any idea what it's like? To watch the person who swore they'd always love you just... move on? Like you never mattered at all?"

"You mattered," Derek said, and he meant it. "But Blake, what we had—it wasn't healthy. For either of us."

"It was real," Blake insisted, his eyes desperate now.

"Whatever else it was, it was real. Those moments—dancing in this loft

at three in the morning, the road trip to Chicago, the night we said we'd grow old together—those were real. You felt it too. I know you did."

Derek's throat tightened. "I did. But—"

"But nothing." Blake's voice turned sharp again, defensive.

"You don't get to rewrite history just because it's easier. You don't get to pretend we were always doomed. We were good, Derek. Until you decided I wasn't worth the work anymore."

"You're twisting this—"

"Am I?" Blake's eyes flashed. "Or am I just finally saying what you've been too guilty to admit? That you gave up. That the second things got hard, you chose yourself over us."

"I won't let you gaslight me,, Blake. I do not love you anymore. You know exactly why. Now, get out."

"I'm going," Blake said, but his feet didn't move. "But answer me this first—when you're with him, do you think about me? Do you remember what we had? Or have you already erased me completely?"

Derek's hands were shaking now. "Blake, please—"

"Please what?" Blake's voice cracked completely, tears finally spilling over. "Please forgive you? Please let you off the hook? Please make this easier for you?" He laughed through the tears. "You left me when I needed you most. You promised forever and gave me four years. And now you want me to just... what? Disappear? Stop loving you? Stop being destroyed by the fact that you gave up on me?"

The weight of Blake's words hung in the air between them.

"I'm not the villain here," Blake said quietly, his voice stripped of all pretense now. "I'm just the guy you didn't love enough to fight for."

Derek felt his throat close. "That's not fair."

"None of this is fair," Blake said. "But you don't get to walk away clean, Derek. You don't get to act like I'm the only one who broke us." He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "You broke promises too. You just did it quietly, so it doesn't count."

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The loft was silent except for Blake's uneven breathing and the distant sounds of the city below.

"I'm sorry," Derek said finally, and he meant it. "I'm sorry I couldn't be what you needed."

Blake's face twisted with something between anger and grief. "You were what I needed. You just decided to stop being it." He turned toward the door, his shoulders slumped. "And now I have to figure out how to stop needing you. How to stop loving someone who doesn't love me back anymore."

"Blake—"

"Don't." Blake held up a hand, not turning around. "Don't tell me I'll find someone else. Don't tell me I need to move on. Don't tell me

this is for the best." His voice was steady now, hardened by pain. "You don't get to comfort me after you're the one who broke me."

He paused at the door, his hand on the handle. When he spoke again, his voice was quiet but carried the weight of finality. "I hope he knows what he's getting. I hope when things get hard—and they will get hard—you don't do to him what you did to me." He finally turned, and his eyes were cold now, all the vulnerability burned away. "I hope he knows that your promises have expiration dates. You were my whole world, Derek. And you just... walked away from it like it was nothing." Blake's voice broke one last time. "So no, this isn't over. Not because I'm threatening you. But because I can't turn off three years of love just because you decided to."

"Stop." Derek's voice cut through the air, sharp and final. "Just stop, Blake."

Blake turned, surprise flickering across his face.

"You want to talk about walking away?" Derek's hands were shaking now, but his voice was steady. "I stayed, Blake. For months after your mom died, I stayed. I went to every AA meeting with you. I drove you to therapy appointments. I held you while you cried and told you it was going to be okay."

"Derek—"

"No. You had your turn." Derek's eyes were hard now. "I watched you pour vodka into your morning coffee. I cleaned you up after you blacked out in the park at one in the afternoon. I broke up fights you started with strangers for no reason except you were drunk and hurting." His voice cracked. "I begged you to keep going to meetings. You stopped showing up. I begged you to stay in therapy. You quit after three sessions."

Blake's face was pale. "You don't understand what it was like —"

"I understand things got hard for you after your mom passed," Derek said, his voice softer but no less firm. "I understand grief. I understand pain. But Blake—you didn't do anything to help yourself. You just kept choosing the bottle, the drugs, the self-destruction. And you expected me to watch you kill yourself slowly and call it love."

"I needed you—"

"I WAS THERE!!!! BUT YOU STARTED FUCKING EVERYONE IN THE CITY! You needed help I couldn't give you," Derek interrupted. "Professional help. Real help. Not someone to enable you or make excuses for you or pretend that showing up drunk to my work events was okay because you were 'going through something.'"

Blake's eyes were wet again. "So you just gave up on me."

"Yes, I made you promises, Blake." Derek's voice was quiet now, heavy with the weight of what he was about to say. "But I made those promises to someone who doesn't exist anymore. I tried to find

him. I tried to help him find his way back to me. But he wouldn't follow. You wouldn't follow.p

The silence stretched between them.

"Your mom was one of the kindest people I ever met," Derek said, his voice gentler now. "And you know what she would tell you right now? She'd tell you that you don't get to be cruel because she died. She'd tell you that grief isn't a license to hurt people who love you. She of all people would've told you that."

Blake flinched as if Derek had struck him.

"I loved you," Derek said. "I loved you so much I almost let you drag me down with you. But loving someone doesn't mean drowning with them, Blake. It doesn't mean setting yourself on fire to keep them warm."

Blake's face crumpled, but there was anger there too—the rage of someone who knows they're being called out and can't deny it.

"So that's it?" Blake's voice was bitter. "You get to feel righteous because you tried? You get to walk away clean because you went to a few meetings?"

"I don't feel clean," Derek said quietly. "I feel like I failed you. But Blake—I was failing me too. And I had to choose."

Blake stared at him for a long moment, his expression cycling through emotions too fast to track—pain, rage, grief, something that might have been understanding before it vanished again.

The door slid open.

"You were my whole world, Derek. And you just... walked away from it like it was nothing." Blake's voice was hollow now, the fight drained out of him. "So no, this isn't over. Not because I'm threatening you. But because I can't turn off three years of love just because you decided to."

He stepped through the door, then paused without looking back.

"When this new thing crashes and burns—and it will, because you don't know how to fight when things get messy—don't come looking for *me* to piece you back together. I won't be there. Just like you weren't there for me."

The door slid closed with a resounding boom that echoed through the space.

Derek stood frozen, Blake's words still hanging in the air like smoke. His hands were shaking. His chest felt tight. But underneath the anger, underneath the frustration, was something different than before—not guilt, exactly, but a deep, aching sadness for what Blake had become and what they'd both lost.

He leaned against the door, closing his eyes.

Derek's throat felt raw, but this time it wasn't from guilt. It was from grief—for the Blake he'd loved, the Blake who'd died long before Derek had walked away.

He thought about calling Gavin, needing his best friend's reassuring voice. But what would he say? That he'd done the right thing? That loving yourself sometimes means letting someone else go?

He rubbed his temples, feeling a headache forming. The encounter had left him hollow and heavy all at once—but not with Blake's manufactured guilt. With the weight of truth spoken aloud, of boundaries finally defended, of love that had tried and failed and had to walk away anyway.

He crossed to the window and looked down. Blake stood on the sidewalk below, his body shaking with what might have been sobs or rage or both. Derek watched as Blake let out a frustrated yell, punching at the air before stumbling down the street.

A complex mix of emotions washed through him. Anger at Blake's manipulation. Pity for what he'd become. Sadness for what they'd lost. And guilt—always guilt—for being the one who'd walked away.

It's over, he reminded himself firmly, but the words felt hollow. *I deserve better than this.*

Blake disappeared into the crowded streets, swallowed by the morning rush, and Derek finally let out the breath he'd been holding.

He had a busy day ahead—wedding preparations, a best friend to support, a tuxedo fitting to attend. He couldn't let Blake's ghost haunt this week.

But as he grabbed his keys and headed for the door, Blake's final words echoed:

"When this new thing crashes and burns—and it will—don't come looking for me."

Derek squared his shoulders, forcing the thoughts away. "Time to be the best damn best man there ever was," he muttered. "And keep your head on straight."

But the guilt Blake had planted was already taking root, and Derek suspected it would be harder to uproot than he wanted to admit.

With a deep breath, Derek stepped out of the car. He plastered on a smile, adjusting his t-shirt and running a hand through his hair in a futile attempt to tame it. He hesitated, the smile faltering for a heartbeat as a crow cawed above, its shadow crossing his path like a fleeting omen.

The sound sent an inexplicable shiver down his spine, leaving him with an unsettling sense of foreboding about the days ahead. Shaking off the superstitious thought, Derek jogged up the steps to

Gavin's front door, ready to face whatever the wedding week might bring.

3 – A Bittersweet Goodbye

The last bell of Ian Mitchell's high school career rang out across the campus of Grosse Pointe High School. The red brick building with its stately white pillars stood proudly under the afternoon sun, its large windows reflecting the clear blue sky. Scattered across the lush green lawn, groups of students reveled in the last moments of their school day. Some tossed footballs or Frisbees with carefree abandon, while others lounged on the steps, their laughter and chatter filling the air with excitement and nostalgia.

Ian's footsteps echoed in the empty hallway as he made his way to the choir room, his hand trailing along the cool lockers that had witnessed four years of his life. His heart pounded with liberation and loss in equal measure.

One last visit, one last goodbye.

He pushed open the familiar door, and the scent hit him first—sheet music, rosin, and lingering traces of CK One perfume—the olfactory backdrop to a thousand teenage dreams.

The room was a haven of music and memories, frozen in the amber of 1995.

Rows of wooden chairs faced the front, each paired with a stand holding well-worn sheet music. Colorful posters of music notes shared wall space with the latest chart-toppers. Boyz II Men gazed soulfully from one corner, while TLC struck a pose in another. A neon-colored motivational poster declared "Teamwork Makes the Dream Work" in bold geometric fonts.

At the front stood a grand piano, its polished surface gleaming in the warm light that filtered through the large windows. Beside it, a small podium waited patiently for the next conductor. A bulky CD player and a dual cassette deck sat on a nearby table, ready to provide backing tracks for rehearsals.

The centerpiece was a stage, framed by rich velvet curtains that had witnessed countless performances. Off to one side, a door led to Ms. Badino's office—a space that had been a source of guidance and comfort for many students over the years.

In one corner, an overhead projector stood ready to display lyrics, its fan humming softly. A whiteboard behind it still bore the fading words "Don't forget! 'Kiss from a Rose' - Seal" in Ms. Badino's neat handwriting.

As Ian's eyes adjusted to the room's warm glow, Ms. Badino emerged from her office. Her light brown hair, now peppered with grays she'd stopped trying to hide, framed a face that lit up at the sight of her student. She wore a floral print dress with subtle shoulder pads—a relic of '80s fashion still clinging to relevance—and a chunky amber brooch that caught the light as she moved.

This room, with its blend of timeless artistry and unmistakable '90s aesthetic, had been Ian's sanctuary throughout high school. Now, on the cusp of graduation, it felt both comfortingly familiar and poignantly temporary—a visual echo of his own liminal state between adolescence and adulthood.

"Ian!" she exclaimed, her arms opening wide.

Ian smiled as he crossed the room to embrace his favorite teacher. The familiar scent of her perfume—something floral and sophisticated—enveloped him as he stepped into her hug. "Hey, Ms. Badino."

As they parted, Ms. Badino kept her hands on Ian's shoulders, her eyes shining. "Oh, I was hoping you'd come in and see me today!"

"I couldn't leave this place forever without saying goodbye to my favorite teacher," Ian replied, his words catching slightly. He swallowed against the unexpected tightness in his throat.

Ms. Badino laughed, a sound that had encouraged countless students over the years. "Well, you won't be leaving forever. You'll be back to visit."

"Yeah. Maybe." Ian's smile faltered as his fingers tapped an unconscious rhythm against his leg.

"You better!" Ms. Badino insisted, giving his shoulders a gentle squeeze before releasing him. "And I will see you at the big wedding next week! Don't think I won't be attending a wedding of two former students that fell in love right here in my very classroom! I couldn't be happier for Gavin and Hillary." She shook her head in wonder. "I just know that you're going to do big things, Ian Mitchell."

Ian nodded, his chest expanding with a rush of gratitude.

"Thanks, Ms. Badino. You really helped me find my voice."

Ms. Badino's smile broadened. "And you ran with it. You Mitchell boys! Such natural talent! You've come so far since the first day of school. Gavin told me his little brother could sing, but you were so shy! I didn't think I'd ever hear you speak, let alone sing a note in front of anyone!"

Ian chuckled at the memory of his younger, more timid self. His fingers unconsciously reached for the music note pendant he often wore—a gift from Ms. Badino after his first solo performance. "Ms. Badino, you taught me how to use my voice as my instrument, and I found how to use it to express myself. I can't tell you how grateful I am."

A thoughtful look crossed Ms. Badino's face. "Ian, do you remember the first song you learned with me?"

Ian furrowed his brow, thinking back. His mind raced through the catalog of music they'd explored together. "Let's see. It was a song from the sixties..."

"Yes! Bobby Vee!" Ms. Badino prompted, her eyes twinkling.

"Oh... what was it called?!" Ian exclaimed, the title just out of reach. His hand slapped against his thigh. "It's right on the tip of my tongue!"

Ms. Badino hummed the chorus of Bobby Vee's "Take Good Care Of My Baby," and recognition dawned on Ian's face instantly.

"Take Good Care Of My Baby!" he laughed, the melody flooding back. He found himself humming along, the notes rising easily.

"It's a classic!" Ms. Badino said. "It fits your sweet tenor voice just perfectly! You know, I gave it to your brother Gavin when he was a junior, but it wasn't a good fit. He ended up doing 'The Duke of Earl' by Gene Chandler!"

Ian's eyes drifted to the poster-sized portrait of Ms. Badino, her proud smile beaming as she held up a large trophy. She stood in the center, flanked by five sharply dressed boys. On one side was Derek Lawson, his muscular arms crossed confidently over his chest. On the other stood his brother, Gavin, with an easy grin and mischief sparkling in his eyes. The photo captured a moment of triumph and camaraderie, frozen in time.

Ian's pulse quickened at the sight of Derek in the photo, the familiar reaction he'd grown accustomed to over the years. He quickly directed his attention back to Ms. Badino, hoping she hadn't noticed.

"I remember," Ian said, clearing his throat. "That was when 'Take Five' was the best it ever was, and ever will be again! Gavin, Derek, Chris Tinlinson's senior year. Dave Marcowitz was a junior, and Steve Urwell was a sophomore."

"Those boys killed it! But, Derek Lawson stole the show singing the solo in that a cappella arrangement of 'In The Still Of The Night' by The Five Satins!" She looked at the portrait with nostalgia dancing in her eyes. "You know, I've never in my life seen two friends support one another like your brother and Derek."

Ian nodded, his memories intertwining with the stories Ms. Badino shared. "Derek and Gavin are like brothers. I remember how they used to spend hours harmonizing in our basement. They were inseparable. They still are."

"The closest I came was seventh in the state," Ian shrugged, his shoulders tensing at the admission.

Ms. Badino's expression softened with understanding. "Ian, you have to remember that your brother was reluctant at first. I had to practically drag him into this classroom his sophomore year! He was all about sports and didn't think he had time for choir."

He pictured his brother's reluctant audition. "I bet Derek was more into it from the start, though, right?" The question slipped out before he could reconsider, his curiosity about Derek ever-present.

Ms. Badino's face lit up. "Oh, absolutely! Derek... he was a natural from the moment he stepped on stage. His talent was undeniable, but it was more than that. He had this magnetism, this star quality that you can't teach."

She gestured to the photo on the wall. "The only school in Michigan history to take the gold for three consecutive years—their sophomore, junior, and senior years—Take Five won first place in the state competition. The first two years, the competition was close. But their senior year..." She paused, shaking her head in awe. "That was something special. They were unstoppable."

"The arrangement of 'In The Still Of The Night,' right?" Ian prompted, recalling the performance he'd watched from the audience, mesmerized by Derek's voice and presence on stage.

"Exactly!" Ms. Badino exclaimed, her hands punctuating her excitement. "Derek's solo in that a cappella arrangement of 'In The Still Of The Night' by The Five Satins... it was breathtaking. His voice leading with Gavin, Chris, Dave, and Steve backing him up was a match made in Doo-Wop heaven!"

She closed her eyes for a moment, as if hearing the performance in her mind. "Derek's voice was pure and effortless. He added runs and made the song his own. It wasn't just about hitting the right notes—it was the emotion, the connection with the audience. That performance single-handedly sealed their third consecutive gold medal."

Ian listened intently, his body unconsciously leaning forward. His heartbeat quickened at the memory of Derek's performance—the confidence, the talent, the way the audience had fallen silent in collective awe.

Ms. Badino continued, her voice softening. "You know, it's not only the looks and the talent... but he believes in himself. He doesn't care what anyone thinks."

She looked at Ian meaningfully.

"Derek Lawson has what it takes to be a star. But Ian, so do you. You just need to believe in yourself the way Derek does."

Ian absorbed her words, his hands fidgeting with the strap of his backpack. The comparison to Derek sparked a complex mix of emotions—admiration for Derek's talent and confidence, a twinge of envy that heated his cheeks, and a determination to find that same self-assurance within himself.

"If I looked like Derek Lawson, I wouldn't care what anyone thought of me either," he said, the words spilling out before he could stop them. He ducked his head, embarrassed.

Ms. Badino's next words pulled Ian from his thoughts. "Ian. You have it too. Star power. Charisma. Looks. A voice like an angel's that

can take your breath away. You just need to stop worrying about what anyone else thinks, and believe in yourself."

The lump in his throat grew. His eyes burned with unexpected tears that he blinked back rapidly.

Suddenly, the reality of what lay ahead hit him—not just the conversation with Ms. Badino, but what waited for him at the oak tree. His stomach tightened, his palms growing damp against the strap of his backpack. He swallowed hard, his mouth gone dry at the thought of finally saying those words out loud to his friends. Would they look at him differently? Would everything change?

Ms. Badino's words touched something deep within him. His heart hammered against his ribs as if trying to break free, and his breath came in shorter bursts. He wanted to believe her, to embrace the confidence she saw in him. But the shadow of doubt still lingered, wrapping around him like a familiar but unwelcome embrace.

As he looked at the photo of "Take Five," his eyes lingered on Derek's confident pose. What would it be like to have that kind of self-assurance? To not constantly second-guess every move, every note? The familiar pang returned—admiration tinged with envy, and something else he wasn't quite ready to name but which sent a flush of warmth up his neck.

"Thanks, Ms. Badino," he managed, his voice thick with emotion. "I'll try to remember that." But even as he said it, a part of him wondered if he could ever truly step out of the shadows and into his own light.

The future loomed ahead, full of possibilities and pitfalls. Could he find the courage to be himself, to chase his dreams, when he wasn't even sure who he really was? "I'll try my best," he promised, barely above a whisper.

Ian glanced at the clock on the wall, the movement of the second hand reminding him of his promise. A jolt of adrenaline shot through him. "Oh—I should probably get going soon. My friends are waiting for me at the oak tree." His heart gave a little jump at the thought of what he planned to tell them.

As their conversation drew to a close, Ms. Badino's final words resonated with Ian, wrapping around him like a comforting blanket. "Go into the world and find yourself. Give the world the gift that is your heart, and never look back."

Ian shifted his weight from one foot to the other, gathering his courage. "Ms. Badino," he began hesitantly, "I've been thinking about taking a year off after graduation." The words hung in the air between them, his admission finally spoken aloud.

Ms. Badino's eyebrows raised slightly, but she nodded encouragingly. "Go on."

Ian took a deep breath. "I want to focus on my singing. Not to be a pop star or anything," he added quickly, his words tumbling out faster, "but just to... sing. To find my voice, you know?" His hands gestured vaguely in the air, trying to capture the nebulous dream he could barely articulate. As the words left his mouth, Ian's shoulders dropped a fraction of an inch, as if physically unburdening himself. It was the first time he'd spoken his dream aloud to anyone.

"I see," Ms. Badino said thoughtfully. "And how do you feel about that decision?"

Ian's emotions tumbled out in a rush, his words punctuated by quick, nervous gestures. "Excited. Terrified. I keep imagining myself in small clubs, just me and a piano, connecting with the audience. But then I think about Gavin and how successful he is, and I wonder if I'm making a huge mistake." His voice cracked slightly on the last word.

Ms. Badino placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Ian, success isn't just about following a set path. It's about being true to yourself."

Ian nodded, his throat tightening with each swallow. "I want to make my family proud, but I also want to be... me. Is that crazy?" The question came out as a plea, his eyes searching her face for reassurance.

"Not at all," Ms. Badino assured him, her grip firm and steady. "It takes courage to follow your heart."

Ian nodded, a tiny flame of hope kindling inside him. The warmth spread through his chest, easing some of the tightness there. If Ms. Badino could accept his unconventional dreams so easily, maybe his friends could accept the other truth he'd been hiding. Maybe telling one secret made telling the next one a little easier. The thought gave him unexpected comfort.

He straightened his posture, drawing in a steady breath. "Thank you for everything, Ms. Badino. I mean it."

"You'll always have a place here, Ian. And I expect front row tickets to your first show," she said with a wink.

Ian smiled, understanding the weight of her words but unsure if he could ever truly be free enough to share his true self with the world.

As he left the choir room for the last time, gently closing the door behind him, the bittersweet taste of endings and new beginnings lingered on his tongue, along with the unspoken truth he'd carried for so long. With each step down the hall toward the oak tree and his waiting friends, his heartbeat quickened—a countdown to the moment when, for better or worse, everything would change.

4 – From The Guy Who Knows

The neon sign of Bucky's Burgers and Shakes cast a warm red glow through the front windows, its buzzing hum a familiar beacon on Jefferson Avenue. Through the glass, chrome gleamed everywhere—from the lined countertops to the trimmed edges of the vinyl booths, all polished to a mirror shine that reflected the afternoon sun in dazzling patterns across the walls. The air was thick with the distinct aromas of the diner: the sizzle-pop of beef patties hitting the flat-top grill, the sweet cloud of vanilla rising from the milkshake station, and the sharp tang of pickle brine that seemed permanently embedded in the quilted stainless steel walls.

Behind the counter, the ancient Hamilton Beach milkshake mixer whirled steadily, its mechanical rhythm mixing with the chatter of customers and the clink of metal spatulas against the grill. The worn spots on the counter told stories of thousands of elbows that had leaned there, decades of coffee cups sliding across its surface, and countless plates of burgers and fries finding their way to hungry patrons.

Sixties music filled the air, blasting from the jukebox as The Contours' "*Do You Love Me*" echoed over the retro-themed diner. The bright red and white checkered flooring and walls adorned with vintage posters transported patrons back in time, creating a bubble of nostalgia in 1995 Detroit.

In a booth near the back, Gavin and Derek sat across from each other, finishing their burgers, fries, and chocolate shakes. Gavin's animated story about Hillary's latest wedding crisis sent Derek into fits of laughter, his head thrown back and shoulders shaking. Their friendship radiated from every shared glance and familiar gesture.

As they were finishing up, Sue Anne, a vivacious server in her early twenties, approached their table. She placed a carry-out bag in front of Gavin and slid the bill towards Derek, letting her hand linger on his for a moment longer than necessary. Her cherry-red nails contrasted sharply against Derek's tanned skin.

Derek raised an eyebrow, a playful smirk tugging at his lips. "What did you just do, Sue Anne?"

Sue Anne batted her eyelashes dramatically, her hand flying to her chest in mock innocence. "Oh, Derek, I just had to touch those strong, manly hands of yours. I mean, how else am I supposed to get my daily dose of disappointment?" She sighed theatrically, her shoulders slumping forward. "It's like window shopping at a store where everything's out of stock... and gay."

Gavin couldn't help but tease, "Oh, come on, Sue Anne. We all know you're not Derek's type. You don't have a Y chromosome."

The three of them burst into laughter, the easy camaraderie between them clear. Sue Anne, undeterred, leaned in closer, her low-cut

uniform revealing more than a little cleavage. "Well Gavin, let me tell you something. Maybe Derek just hasn't found the 'right' girl to spend some quality alone time with."

Derek's eyes twinkled with mischief. "The only girl that is 'right' for me is a man!"

Gavin and Derek doubled over laughing. Sue Anne playfully clutched her heart, her lower lip jutting out in an exaggerated pout.

"Well, listen up, you handsome devils!" She planted her hands on her hips. "This is probably the last time I see ya before the wedding, so don't forget to come in here and show me some snapshots after your fancy tuxedo-wearing shindig next Friday. Oh, and by the way, I caught Hillary walking into the bridal shop a few days ago with her mother to try on her wedding dress. She gave me a sneak peek, and let me tell ya. When she walks down that aisle, your eyeballs might just pop out of their sockets, Gavin Mitchell. You're one lucky guy."

She reached over and felt Gavin's bicep, her fingers squeezing appreciatively. He looked at Derek, smiling. Derek laughed and winked at him.

"But it feels here like Hillary is the lucky one. But let's not forget about Derek...oh sweet, sweet Derek." Sue Anne's voice dropped to a theatrical whisper. "It's just a darn shame you prefer boy buns over girl bits. Do you realize how many disappointed women are missing out on orgasms because of this?! It's a tragedy, really. A goddamn tragedy for all womankind."

With that, she winked and walked away, giving the laughing boys a little wave, her hips swaying with exaggerated emphasis.

Derek watched her go, his smile lingering for a moment before gradually fading. His shoulders, which had been shaking with laughter seconds before, now stiffened almost imperceptibly. The diner's cheerful atmosphere suddenly felt like a movie set—bright and perfect on the surface, but ultimately just a backdrop. He caught his reflection in the chrome napkin holder, staring back at him with sudden weariness.

The jukebox switched to "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow" by The Shirelles, the soft, questioning lyrics floating through the air. Derek's fingers tightened around his water glass as his mind drifted to other conversations, other promises that had turned hollow with time.

Gavin noticed the change in his friend's expression, recognizing that familiar distant look. It was the same one Derek got whenever something reminded him of Blake—like watching a storm gather behind his eyes. His gaze followed Derek's to the chrome napkin holder, understanding exactly where his friend's thoughts had wandered.

The remains of their lunch sat forgotten between them: half-eaten fries growing cold, ketchup smears on white plates like wounds.

Gavin stirred his melting milkshake with his straw, the scraping sound too loud in their sudden pocket of silence. A lifetime of friendship had taught him to read Derek's moods like weather patterns, and right now, he could feel the pressure dropping.

Gavin set down his straw and leaned forward, clearing his throat softly. He hesitated, then broached the subject they'd both been avoiding.

"Have you heard from Blake?"

The question hung in the air between them, heavy with unspoken history. Derek's posture stiffened further, his hands coming to rest on the table, one atop the other, as if bracing himself. The carefree moment they'd shared with Sue Anne just seconds ago might as well have been years ago, dissolving like sugar in hot coffee.

"Oh, yes. He's shown up at my place, begging me to take him back at least every other day since I caught him in my bed with the Gunberry twins." Derek's jaw tightened.

"What the hell is a Gunberry?" Gavin's face contorted with confusion, nose wrinkling as if he'd caught a whiff of something unpleasant.

"Johann and Luc Gunberry. They're twin brothers who do gay porn. They're pretty popular right now." Derek's voice was flat, each word carefully controlled.

Gavin shuddered, his whole body recoiling. "That's so wrong in so many ways." His face scrunched up like he'd just bitten into a lemon. "Gunberry twins? Sounds like a rejected flavor for Twinkies. Wait, don't tell me—they come in a package deal?" He paused, horror dawning on his face. "Oh God, I just made it worse, didn't I?"

Derek ran a hand through his hair, chuckling ruefully. His shoulders eased slightly, some of the tension bleeding away. "You know, when Blake said he wanted to be a 'rising star', I didn't realize he meant it so... literally. I thought he was talking about Hollywood, not Hole-ywood." He groaned at his own pun. "And now I need to bleach my brain."

Gavin shook his head in disbelief. "I still do not know why you supported that, man. There's no way in a million, gazillion years that I would give Hillary my blessing to fuck other guys on camera. The only thing she'd be starring in is 'Desperate Housewives of Grosse Pointe: The Fully Clothed Edition'." He shuddered again, more dramatically. "The only thing I want filmed in our bedroom is our unboxing video for our new vacuum cleaner."

Derek laughed through a sigh, his shoulders slumping. He absently traced a pattern in the condensation on his water glass, avoiding Gavin's eyes. "You know, sometimes I wonder how I let things with him go on for so long."

Gavin's expression hardened. "I've been wondering the same thing since you first brought him around. That guy was bad news from day one."

"You never liked him," Derek admitted with a sigh.

"Damn right I didn't," Gavin agreed, but his tone was more concerned than accusatory. "Remember when you first snuck off and spent the night with him? You came home smelling of shame and regret."

Derek nodded, a rueful smile on his face. "Yeah, he had some strange effect on me. He was so charismatic, so full of life. I thought he was everything I wanted."

"More like everything you thought you wanted," Gavin corrected. "I saw right through his act. The guy was a walking red flag."

Derek stirred his coffee absently, watching the liquid swirl into a small whirlpool. "You know, he wasn't always like that."

Gavin raised an eyebrow, his fork pausing halfway to his mouth. "I know, Derek. Mr. Party-All-Night wanted to be a therapist."

"Hard to believe, right?" Derek chuckled humorlessly. "But then his mom got sick. Cancer. Blake dropped out to help support his family. That's when he started bartending at those clubs."

"And that's where he got into the whole porn scene?" Gavin asked, setting down his fork.

Derek sighed dramatically. "It was like watching a caterpillar turn into a butterfly... if butterflies were into body glitter and daddy issues. One day he's studying Freud, the next he's 'studying' how to fit into assless chaps. Talk about a career pivot."

Gavin leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest. "I remember. That's when things really started going downhill. He'd show up to our family dinners high as a kite, making scenes and embarrassing you in front of everyone."

"God, those dinners," Derek groaned, dropping his head into his hands momentarily. "Your mom was ready to kick me out after the third time he showed up wasted and started a fight with your cousin Mike for 'looking at me wrong.'"

"I still can't believe you stayed with him after that," Gavin said, shaking his head.

Derek's face fell, his earlier animation draining away. "I thought I could help him, you know? I kept thinking if I just loved him enough, supported him enough, he'd go back to being the guy I fell for."

"But he never did," Gavin finished softly.

"No, he didn't," Derek agreed. "Instead, he dragged me down with him. I started drinking more, going to those industry parties. I almost lost my job because of him."

Derek's voice grew quiet as memories flooded back. His gaze drifted to the window, seeing not the busy street outside but scenes

from a past he couldn't escape. "You remember how he was in the beginning? We'd spend weekends at the library while he studied for his psych exams. He'd practice counseling techniques on me, always trying to get me to 'open up about my feelings.'" A sad smile crossed his face. "He was so passionate about helping people then."

"I remember," Gavin nodded. "You two would show up at family dinners with all these psychology books. My mom thought it was adorable."

"That Blake..." Derek's voice cracked slightly. He cleared his throat, blinking rapidly. "That Blake would've been horrified by what he became. When his mom got sick, something just... broke in him. It wasn't just the career change—it was like he became a different person entirely."

Derek's fingers tapped a nervous rhythm against the tabletop. "You know what really kills me? His mom never even wanted him to drop out. She begged him to stay in school. But Blake... he had this way of making destructive choices seem noble. Like dropping out was this grand sacrifice he was making for his family."

"The clubs changed him," Gavin added softly. "I watched it happen. Every week, he came back a little different. A little harder. A little more lost."

Derek exhaled slowly, rubbing a hand over his face. "You know what really scared me most? It wasn't the porn. It was the drinking. The coke. The way he'd go days without sleeping and call it energy. I'd come home and find him wired out of his mind, talking a mile a minute, convinced he was fine. Then I'd wake up at three in the morning to the sound of him throwing up in the bathroom."

Gavin frowned, his fork halfway to his mouth before he set it down. "Jesus, Derek."

"I kept thinking if I just stayed, if I loved him hard enough, maybe I could anchor him. But every time I tried, he'd slip further. The more I held on, the more he pulled away." Derek's voice cracked. "Now every time the phone rings, I half expect it to be someone telling me he's dead."

Gavin reached across the table, his tone firm but gentle. "You've done everything you could, Derek. Everything. Blake needs to learn to take care of himself. End of story."

Derek looked up, eyes glassy but steady.

"His problems," Gavin continued, "should not keep you from being happy... from living your damn life. You can't save someone who's hell-bent on drowning."

Derek gave a small, weary laugh. "Yeah, well, I've been treading water for so long, I'm not sure I'd recognize the shore if I saw it."

Gavin smiled, squeezing his shoulder. "Then maybe it's time to swim toward something better."

Derek nodded, his eyes distant, and his mind drifted to the night everything changed with Blake. They'd been at one of those industry parties, the air thick with smoke and the scent of alcohol...

"Come on, babe," Blake had slurred, tugging at Derek's arm. "Just one more line. It'll be fun."

Derek had pulled away, disgust and disappointment warring within him. "No, Blake. I'm done. I can't keep doing this."

The hurt in Blake's eyes had almost made Derek change his mind.

Almost.

Gavin reached across the table, squeezing Derek's shoulder. "You got out. That's what matters."

Derek nodded, but his expression remained troubled. His hands clenched and unclenched on the table. "Yeah, but only after I caught him in bed with the Gunberry twins. In my bed, Gav. My fucking bed. That was the final straw."

Gavin's face flushed with anger. His jaw clenched. "Killing him was all I wanted to do, Derek. I wish you would've let me do something to him. Break his leg...a foot...at least a toe."

Derek's expression softened slightly. "No, man. That little... slut-faced-hoe-bag just isn't worth the trouble. He's miserable now, anyway. Turns out the Gunberry twins had no intentions of getting him into a movie. They just wanted his ass." He paused, a flicker of his old feelings surfacing. "It is a sweet little ass."

Gavin's reaction was immediate and fierce. He slammed his palm on the table, making their water glasses jump. "No, Derek! It's not sweet! It's a chocolate expressway straight to Hell! There's nothing about Blake Summers that is sweet! It's a chlamydia infected, scabies infested, black hole of narcissism and hate! Don't even consider going there! You will never come back this time."

Derek couldn't help but laugh at Gavin's colorful description, the tension in his shoulders easing as the sound bubbled up from his chest. Gratitude for his friend's unwavering support washed over him. The laughter seemed to break the tension, allowing them both to relax.

"You're right," Derek admitted, his smile tinged with sadness. "I know you're right. It's just... sometimes I miss what we had. Or what I thought we had." His eyes tracked a young couple at another table, their hands intertwined, heads bent close together. "You and Hillary, though—that's the real deal. What you guys have is what I thought I had with Blake."

Gavin reached across the table, clasping Derek's shoulder. "I know, man. But you deserve so much better than that asshole. You'll

find someone who truly appreciates you, someone who won't take you for granted."

Derek nodded, taking a deep breath. "Thanks, Gav. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Probably cry yourself to sleep every night," Gavin teased, but his eyes grew serious. "Hey, speaking of being there for each other... You know things won't change between us after the wedding, right? I mean, yeah, I'll be married, but you're still my best friend."

Derek forced a smile, trying to ignore the twinge of uncertainty that rippled through him. "Of course, man. Nothing could change that." But as he watched Gavin's excited face, he couldn't help but wonder if that was really true.

Sometimes Derek felt trapped by the image he'd cultivated—the strong one, the protector. Even his nickname among the Mitchell kids, "Superman," felt like a cape that was getting heavier to wear.

Gavin felt a pang of guilt at Derek's forced smile. He knew his best friend was putting on a brave face, but the uncertainty in Derek's eyes was unmistakable. Gavin wanted to reassure him, to promise that nothing would change, but he knew that wasn't entirely true. Marriage was a big step, and it would inevitably shift some dynamics in his life.

Gavin grabbed Derek's shoulders, leaning across the table until their faces were inches apart. "Listen up, you fabulous fool. Marriage will not change us. You think Hillary can handle all this," he gestured wildly at himself, almost knocking over his milkshake, "alone? No way. You're stuck with me, buddy. We're like peanut butter and jelly, Batman and Robin, tequila and poor decisions. Inseparable!"

Gavin's mind flashed to all the plans he and Hillary had made—their dream house, talks of starting a family, their shared goals. Excitement surged through him, even as a hint of fear tightened his chest. It was a lot to take on, but having Derek by his side made it all seem more manageable.

"Besides," Gavin added with a grin, "who else is going to keep me from going crazy when I'm neck-deep in diapers and baby formula? I'm counting on you, buddy."

Derek clutched his chest dramatically, throwing his head back. "Oh, so now I'm promoted from best friend to 'Chief Diaper Disposal Officer'? Be still, my beating heart." He pretended to wipe away a tear. "I've never been so honored. Do I get a badge? Or just the privilege of smelling like baby powder and regret?"

They both burst out laughing, the sound ricocheting off the diner's tiled walls. As if on cue, the jukebox began playing "Runaround Sue" by Dion and the Belmonts.

Derek and Gavin perked up, their eyes meeting in instant recognition. Without missing a beat, they sang along, their voices blending in perfect harmony.

*“Here’s my story, it’s sad but true / It’s about a girl that I
once knew / She took my love and ran around / With every single guy in
town...”*

Patrons ceased their conversations and turned to watch,
mesmerized by the impromptu performance.

*“Yeah, I should have known it from the very start / This
girl would leave me with a broken heart / Now, listen people what I’m tellin’
you / I’d keep away from a Runaround Sue, yeah”*

As Derek and Gavin belted out the chorus, Sue Anne sidled up
to a bewildered family of four. “See those hunks of musical man-meat?”
she stage-whispered, jabbing a thumb towards the impromptu
performers. “Local legends, they are. Won every competition from
singing to synchronized swimming. Rumor has it they once harmonized
so perfectly, they accidentally hypnotized the entire school assembly.”
She winked conspiratorially. “The principal woke up thinking he was
Cher. Took weeks to convince him otherwise.”

*“She likes to travel around, yeah / She’ll love you, and
she’ll put you down / Now, people let me put you wise / Sue goes out with other
guys”*

As Derek took the lead for the last verse, his powerful vocals
filled the diner, the lyrics about love and betrayal taking on new
meaning after their conversation about Blake.

*“Here’s the moral and the story from that guy who knows /
I fell in love and my love still grows / Ask any fool that she ever knew, they’ll
say / A-keep away from a Runaround Sue, yeah”*

The last notes of the song hung in the air, met with
enthusiastic applause.

Derek and Gavin, still basking in the euphoria of their
performance, exchanged a knowing glance before reaching across the
table to perform their legendary secret handshake.

Their hands moved in a blur of intricate patterns—slapping,
gripping, twisting—movements perfected over nineteen years of
friendship. The ritual ended with simultaneous finger guns and
exaggerated winks, drawing another round of applause from their
captivated audience.

As the excitement died down, their conversation turned to the
upcoming wedding.

"I can't wait to see Ms. Badino at the wedding!" Derek exclaimed, his previous melancholy forgotten as his eyes brightened.

Gavin nodded enthusiastically, drumming his fingers on the table. "I know! Right?! Man, I can't wait either. This wedding is going to be epic!"

Derek's gaze fell on the carry-out bag in front of Gavin. "Is that Ian's food?"

"Yes!" Gavin confirmed, peeking inside. "Cheeseburger, fries, and a big, fat pickle!"

Derek straightened in his seat, his entire demeanor transforming with sudden eagerness. His eyes widened, and an excited grin spread across his face. "Let's bounce, go pick up Little Mitchell, and go get fitted for our fucking tuxedos we're wearing to your fucking wedding next week!"

Gavin leapt to his feet, matching Derek's enthusiasm. "Fuck yeah! Let's go!"

They tossed bills on the table and hurried toward the exit, their long strides synchronized like everything else they did together. As they left Bucky's Burgers and Shakes in a whirlwind of energy and excitement, all eyes followed them out the door. The air in the diner seemed to crackle with the residual energy of their presence, leaving behind a wake of whispers and longing glances.

Little did they know that their next stop would set in motion a series of events that would change all their lives forever.

5 - I Am What I Am

The final bell of Grosse Pointe High School blared through the hallways, igniting a chorus of whoops and hollers from the graduating seniors. Their energy crackled in the air like electricity, a palpable wave of liberation surging through the building. Excited chatter and laughter ricocheted off the lockers as students rushed toward freedom, eager to escape the confines of school for good.

Among them, Ian Mitchell made a beeline for a side door, his shoulders hunched slightly as if trying to make himself smaller in the crowd. He wove through the throng of celebrating classmates, his fingers gripping the strap of his backpack so tightly his knuckles whitened. Even as he orchestrated his escape, a conflicting ache bloomed in his chest—a bittersweet recognition that he was leaving behind a place that, for all its complications, had been his home for four years.

"Hey, Ian!" a male voice called out, halting his escape.

Ian's muscles tensed, his heart skipping an anxious beat. He turned slowly, dread pooling in his stomach as his gaze landed on Alex Hoffman, the star athlete and best friend of Mike Zender.

With a confident stance and an easy smile, Alex stood among a group of jocks, his arm casually draped around the waist of a beautiful girl. Ian's stomach twisted with unease as he took in the scene before him. The afternoon sunlight streaming through the hallway windows glinted off Alex's perfectly styled hair and chiseled features, making him appear almost god-like. But it was the adoring looks of his peers that truly solidified his status as the most popular and admired student at their school. Ian couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy towards this seemingly perfect boy standing before him—not for his popularity, but for the ease with which he moved through the world, never questioning his place in it.

"Yes, Alex?" Ian replied cautiously, his voice quieter than he intended.

Alex's lips curled into a smirk as he looked around at his audience, clearly performing for them. "Just wanted to say congrats... We're outta here!"

"Thanks. Same to you, Alex, I guess," Ian mumbled, still on edge. His fingers fidgeted with the hem of his shirt, ready to make his escape at the first opportunity.

Alex's smirk deepened, his brain clearly working overtime to come up with an insult. "Hey Mitchell, got any big plans tonight? Let me guess—a thrilling evening of alphabetizing your sock drawer? Or maybe a wild party with your imaginary friends?" He paused for dramatic effect, his audience leaning forward in anticipation. "Oh wait, I know! You're probably off to audition for 'America's Next Top Bottom', right?"

Alex's girlfriend laughed on cue, but her eyes darted to Ian with something that might have been pity. Alex's grip on her waist tightened imperceptibly, his smile becoming more forced.

Ian rolled his eyes dramatically, summoning a courage he didn't entirely feel. "Oh Alex, your wit is as sharp as a rubber ball. Tell me, do you have to remove your brain to fit into those tight jeans, or does it just naturally migrate south when you're thinking extra hard?"

"*What'd* you say, fag boy?" Alex's face darkened, his performative humor giving way to genuine anger.

"I'm just saying, Alex," Ian retorted softly, "I can't believe they let you graduate! You're a complete dumbass!"

"What the fuck did you just say to me, Mitchell?" Alex said, taking two aggressive steps toward Ian, his shoulders squaring and hands curling into loose fists.

"Nothing, Alex," Ian said, rolling his eyes, but taking an instinctive step backward. "Just keep up the pretense of being a smart jock. It's so convincing."

"You're lucky I'm not going to kick your little pansy ass right now, Mitchell. I'll just wait until I see you walking down at The Ridge, hand in hand, with another faggot." The threat in Alex's voice was unmistakable, vibrating in the air between them.

Ian scoffed, hiding his fear behind bravado. "I wouldn't be caught dead at The Ridge where you and the other meathead jocks take your nympho cheerleaders to impregnate them with babies that will just grow up to be as stupid as you."

Alex's audience just stared, shocked into silence that Ian actually stuck up for himself. The hallway seemed to hold its collective breath.

"This ain't over, you little fudge packing fairy faggot!" Alex's voice echoed down the hallway, bouncing off locker doors and classroom windows. "You will see me again, and you won't be able to walk away."

Ian felt each word like a physical blow, but kept his face carefully neutral as he finally slipped out the side door, escaping into the warm afternoon air. Once outside, his back pressed against the sturdy brick building for support, his legs suddenly weak beneath him. He took a deep, shaky breath and blinked back tears that threatened to spill over, his throat tight with emotions he couldn't afford to release.

Not here.

Not now.

Ian's shoes crunched against the gravel as he made his way toward the oak tree, each step bringing him closer to the moment of truth. The afternoon sun filtered through the leaves above, creating shifting patterns on the ground that reminded him of another day, another moment of truth that had gone unspoken.

The memory surfaced unbidden, edges sharpening until Ian could taste the winter air of that night two years ago, feel the cold nipping at his cheeks as he waited.

Derek had offered to drop him and Shawnee off at the mall on his way to the movies with...some boy. Ian's stomach had twisted with something he hadn't wanted to name then, watching Derek's easy smile as he talked about his date, the way his eyes had lit up with anticipation.

Derek's cologne had filled the car with a warmth that seemed to pulse with each beat of Ian's heart—something expensive and clean that made Ian think of mountain air and possibility. The leather seats had creaked softly with each movement, a sound that even now brought back the flutter of anticipation he'd felt just being near Derek.

R.E.M.'s "Losing My Religion" had been playing softly on the stereo, Michael Stipe's voice weaving through the space between them. Derek's fingers had drummed against the steering wheel—not quite in rhythm, Ian remembered, but with a confidence that made the missteps seem intentional. Even then, Ian had found himself watching those fingers, imagining them running through his hair, trailing across his skin...

But then they'd arrived at the mall, and everything had changed.

Alex Hoffman and his friends had been loitering near the entrance, a pack of suburban wolves in baggy jeans and backwards baseball caps. Even then, Alex had been the ringleader, the one who always seemed to zero in on Ian's vulnerabilities with unerring accuracy. The moment they spotted Ian, the slurs had started—vicious words that cut through the cool evening air like knives. Each syllable had landed like a physical blow, making Ian want to fold in on himself, to disappear.

Derek had just pulled up to the mall entrance to drop them off when Alex's first slur rang out. Without hesitation, Derek threw the car into park and stepped out. Ian remembered how his broad shoulders had tensed, how his jaw had set. Then, with a deliberate calm that was somehow more frightening than anger, Derek had approached the group.

The memory was crystal clear: Derek's measured stride, the way he'd singled out Alex, the almost casual way he'd gripped the back of the boy's neck. His voice had been low, controlled, but carried an edge Ian had never heard before.

"If I ever hear you say anything like that to him again," Derek had said, each word precise and cutting, "I'll show you what it's like to get the shit beat out of you by a faggot."

The way Alex's face had drained of color, how his friends had backed away—it was all seared into Ian's memory. But what stood out most was how Derek had protected him without ever acknowledging what needed protecting. He'd never mentioned the slurs to Ian's parents when Alex's family called to complain about Derek "hitting" their son. He'd accepted his week of grounding without protest, without explanation.

Ian remembered overhearing his parents that night.

"He's smarter than this," Graham had said, disappointment heavy in his voice. "Next time, he needs to tell an adult."

"I know," Imogen had agreed. "But you know Derek—always trying to be Superman. He's always been so protective of Ian, Graham. His heart is in the right place. It always is. Thank God it was Derek and not Gavin. The Hoffman boy wouldn't have known what hit him."

Graham laughed, and sighed. "Yeah, you're right. He just can't throw his football career away because of violence."

Later that night, after the house had grown quiet and Ian had retreated to his room, voices drifted through the heating vent—Gavin and Derek in the basement, their words carried on currents of warm air.

"I should go find that little shit," Gavin's voice was tight with contained fury. "Make sure he understands what happens when you mess with my little brother. What exactly did he say?"

"Called him a nerd. A spaz. Choir boy... Typical jock stuff. I took care of it," Derek's reply came soft but firm. "For now."

A pause stretched between them, filled with the quiet hum of the furnace and years of unspoken understanding.

"You sure?" Gavin pressed. "Because I could—"

"I'm sure," Derek cut him off, gentle but final. "Sometimes less is more, Gav. He got the message."

And he had—for a while. Alex Hoffman's swagger diminished to furtive glances in the hallway, his usual venom reduced to whispers behind Ian's back. The rest of that school year passed in relative peace, a temporary ceasefire bought with Derek's quiet warning.

But then autumn came, bringing change like scattered leaves. Derek and Gavin left for college, their absence leaving spaces that seemed to echo in the halls of Grosse Pointe High.

Derek had started dating someone—a sophomore at University of Michigan who played in a band. Ian would see pictures sometimes, glimpses of Derek's new life that made his own seem smaller somehow.

When Alex and his friends started up again, their taunts now tinged with renewed confidence, Ian said nothing. The thought of running to Derek now, when he was building his own life, discovering his own love—it felt like reaching for a childhood security blanket he should have outgrown. So Ian learned to walk different routes to class, to keep his head down, to swallow the words that burned in his throat.

He didn't want to be the little brother who needed saving anymore, even if that meant learning to live with the wounds that silence left behind

The memory faded as Ian's focus returned to the present. His gaze landed on the massive oak tree in the distance, its gnarled branches reaching towards the sky like outstretched arms. Three familiar figures

sat beneath it, their silhouettes etched against the warm glow of the afternoon sun.

Summoning all his courage, Ian began the slow walk across the sprawling green lawn towards his steadfast friends, who waited patiently for him. The grass brushed against his ankles, swaying gently in the breeze, as if urging him forward on this momentous journey. Each step felt heavier than the last, the weight of his secret pressing down on him, making his movements sluggish despite his determination.

Renee, Shawnee, and Amelia lay scattered amongst a mismatch of flannel shirts, seeking refuge in the dappled shade of the grand oak tree. Their animated voices carried across the lawn, a familiar melody of friendship and shared jokes. As Ian approached, their words tapered off into silence. He could feel their eyes on him, studying his expression, noting the unusual tension in his shoulders.

Renee was mid-sentence when she spotted Ian approaching. "—and this better be it. I'm just saying, if he doesn't tell us soon, I'm going to—" She cut herself off.

"Going to what?" Shawnee asked, following her gaze. "Oh."

"We've been patient," Amelia said softly, closing her sketchbook. "He'll tell us when he's ready."

"He's *been* ready," Shawnee muttered. "He's been ready for years. He's just been scared."

"Then we wait until he's not scared anymore," Amelia said firmly.

Shawnee was the first to notice him hesitate at the edge of the shade. "Okay, Mitchell," she said, pushing herself up on her elbows, her cherry Doc Martens digging into the dirt. "Spill. You've been twitchier than a Backstreet Boy on espresso. What's going on?"

Amelia, sitting cross-legged beside her sketchbook, looked up more softly. "You've seemed... far away lately," she said, her tone measured but kind. "Is everything alright?"

Renee popped a bubble with her gum and flipped her braid over one shoulder. "If this is about flunking gym again, babe, we've already agreed you're a lover, not a dodgeballer."

Their voices held their usual blends of brashness and affection, but Ian detected an undercurrent of genuine concern. His stomach clenched tighter, the rehearsed speech he'd been practicing for weeks suddenly evaporating from his mind.

Ian shifted nervously, playing with a loose thread on his ripped jeans. His heart hammered against his ribs, each beat reverberating through his entire body. Taking a deep breath, he braced himself for what he was about to reveal.

As he settled against the oak's rough bark, he pressed his palm against the tree trunk, feeling centuries of growth beneath his

fingertips. The ancient ridges and valleys of bark imprinted themselves on his skin—a testament to endurance, to standing tall through countless seasons of change.

No matter what happens, I want to remember this moment, he thought. The moment I finally reveal my truth.... I want to remember everything. Forever.

The air carried the green scent of freshly cut grass from the football field, mingling with Amelia's familiar vanilla perfume and the faint strawberry of Shawnee's lip gloss. A breeze rustled through the oak's canopy above, dappling their faces with shifting patterns of gold and shadow as the late afternoon sun filtered through the leaves. Each sensation etched itself into Ian's memory with preternatural clarity—the weight of unspoken words heavy on his tongue, the dampness of perspiration gathering at his temples, the distant laughter of other students celebrating their freedom.

"There's something I need to tell you guys," he began, his voice shaking with fear. His hands trembled, and he clasped them together to hide it. "And I'm terrified to say it out loud, but I can't keep pretending."

The girls exchanged worried glances as Amelia scooted closer, her flowered dress pooling around her as she reached out to offer a comforting touch on Ian's knee. The simple gesture nearly undid him—this unconditional kindness before he'd even spoken his truth.

Amelia straightened, sensing the tremor beneath his words. "Hey," she murmured, reaching to touch his knee. "Whatever it is, you can tell us."

"Yeah," Shawnee added, folding her arms but softening her voice. "Unless you murdered someone. In that case, I'll help bury the body, but I'm not confessing on camera."

"Ditto," Renee said brightly. "But I'll bring snacks."

"I'm gay," he blurted out, the words tumbling from his lips in a rush. "I've known this for... God, *forever*, I think. But I've *never* said it out loud before. To *anyone*."

For a moment, there was silence. Ian kept his gaze glued to the ground, counting the individual blades of grass, the scattered acorns, anything to avoid looking up. His blood rushed in his ears, drowning out everything but the thundering of his own heart. Would they be disgusted? Disappointed? Would everything change?

Amelia's hand instinctively squeezed his knee tighter, her artist's eyes already filling with tears she was trying to blink away.

Renee's mouth formed a soft "oh" of understanding, like a puzzle piece clicking into place.

Shawnee's face remained carefully neutral for three heartbeats—then her lips twitched.

To his shock and relief, the silence broke with an unexpected sound—Shawnee's derisive snort. Then, she let out a bark of laughter. "That's *it*? Jesus, Mitchell, we thought you had cancer or something."

Amelia covered her mouth to hide a smile that was equal parts relief and tenderness. "Oh, Ian... sweetheart. We've known since you corrected my harmony on 'Part of Your World' in eighth grade."

Renee threw her hands up dramatically. "Thank God! I was about to die keeping that secret you didn't even tell me! My psychic powers were exhausted."

Ian's head snapped up, eyes wide with disbelief, to find his friends grinning at him. Their faces showed no trace of the disgust or rejection he had feared, only affection and something like... amusement?

"You... you guys... you *knew*!?" His voice cracked on the last word, disbelief making him dizzy.

Amelia laughed, the sound like wind chimes in a gentle breeze, and put her arm around Ian's shoulder. "Sweetie... You color-code your notes and unironically enjoy Sondheim. We're your best friends. Of course we knew."

"The real question is why did it take you so long to figure it out?" Renee asked softly, with understanding in her tone. There was no judgment in her voice, only gentle curiosity.

A sound escaped Ian then, caught between a laugh and a sob. His shoulders shook as relief coursed through him, a physical sensation like warm honey spreading through his veins. Tears blurred his vision, but for once, he didn't try to hold them back.

"I guess I was afraid of changing everything. Of losing you guys." His voice was barely above a whisper, but in this sacred circle beneath the oak, it carried perfectly.

Part of Ian—a small, ungenerous part—had almost wanted them to be more surprised. To struggle with it, just a little. The ease of their acceptance was beautiful, but it also meant they'd been keeping this knowledge from him.

Waiting for him.

That felt uncomfortably close to pity.

He shoved the thought away, ashamed of himself.

Shawnee scoffed, her combat boots digging into the soft earth as she leaned forward.

"That is never gonna happen. And anyone who has a problem with you being gay will have to deal with me," she declared, cracking her knuckles for emphasis. Her eyes flashed with protective fire. "And trust me, they don't want that."

"Are you going to tell your parents?" Amelia asked, her tone gentle but practical as always.

"Eventually," Ian said, wiping at his eyes with the back of his hand. The thought sent a fresh wave of anxiety through him, but it felt

more manageable now, after this first hurdle had been cleared so beautifully.

Amelia's brow furrowed as she considered Ian's dilemma. Her fingers absently played with the daisy chain she'd been weaving. "Have you thought about the long-term implications of coming out right before the wedding?" she asked gently. "It might be wise to wait until after the ceremony to avoid overshadowing Gavin's big day."

Ian thought this over, grateful for Amelia's thoughtful pragmatism. "Yeah, I think that would probably be best." The relief of having shared his secret with his friends was already overwhelming enough; the thought of facing his family's reactions seemed insurmountable at the moment.

Renee clapped her hands. "Or we just skip the heavy stuff and throw a coming-out-slash-birthday party! Glitter optional, tears mandatory!"

Shawnee stepped forward, her movements decisive and forceful as always. "That's what I'm talking about! Ian, for now, we know, and we love you and have your back."

She pulled Ian into a tight embrace, her arms wrapping around him with fierce protectiveness. Amelia and Renee quickly joined, until they were a tangled mess of arms and flannel, with Ian at the center. Tears streamed freely down his face now as he beamed at them, his heart so full it threatened to burst.

"God, I *love* you guys." The words came out watery but sincere, his gratitude too vast for more elaborate expression.

Amelia held him like something precious that might break.

Shawnee's grip was fierce, protective, almost painful.

Renee bounced on her toes even while hugging him, unable to contain her energy.

They stood like that for a few beautiful moments until Renee finally broke away, bouncing on her toes with characteristic enthusiasm. Her bright laugh cut through the air, shattering the emotional intensity with perfect timing.

Ian pulled back from the embrace, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand, but this time the tears felt different—not shame or fear, but release. Something shifted in his chest, like a door that had been locked finally swinging open.

"You know what?" His voice came out stronger than it had all day, surprising even himself. "I'm tired of being scared. I'm tired of making myself small." He looked at each of his friends in turn, drawing strength from their acceptance. "Tonight, when we go to Menjo's, I'm not going to hide. I'm going to dance. I'm going to be exactly who I am, and if anyone has a problem with it—"

"They'll have to deal with me," Shawnee finished, cracking her knuckles with a grin.

"No," Ian said, and there was steel in his voice that made all three girls look at him with new respect. "They'll have to deal with me first."

Renee whooped, bouncing on her toes. "Yes! That's the energy we need!"

But Ian wasn't done. The words kept coming, like he'd finally found a valve to release years of pressure. "I spent four years letting Alex Hoffman make me feel like I was less than. I spent four years hiding in the music room, taking different hallways, making myself invisible." His hands curled into fists at his sides. "I'm done. I'm eighteen years old tomorrow, and I'm done apologizing for existing."

Amelia's eyes shimmered with tears, ut she was smiling. "Ian Mitchell, that was the most beautiful thing I've ever heard you say."

"About damn time," Shawnee added, but her voice was thick with emotion

"Guys, can you believe it? We're officially high school graduates! The world is our oyster!" Amelia's enthusiasm was contagious, and Ian felt a smile tugging at his lips despite his emotional exhaustion. "Enough with the sappy Hallmark stuff. Let's get down to business and plan your epic birthday celebration," she exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "I mean, come on guys, it's your eighteenth birthday! And in case you forgot, that's only eight hours and forty-two minutes away," she dramatically checked her watch. "No way are we letting you waste this milestone eating ice cream and listening to 'I Am What I Am' on repeat. That's just not how we roll."

Ian laughed, wiping away his tears with the sleeve of his flannel shirt. "Yeah, that was kind of the plan," he admitted sheepishly.

"Absolutely not." Amelia said, stomping her foot, the most forceful gesture Ian had ever seen from his normally gentle friend. "Nope. We're going out. We're dancing. We're ringing in adulthood and embracing your fabulousness in style!"

"Ooh, what about that place in Detroit? You know, the one Renee's cousin told us about?" Shawnee shouted, jumping up and down, her combat boots leaving small divots in the soft earth.

"The place Madonna used to go dance before she moved to New York!?! Menjo's?" Amelia shrieked, her usual composure giving way to excited hand-flapping.

Renee put both hands in the air, her bracelets jangling together.

"Menjo's! And yes. Oh my god, YES. Ian, it's perfect—you'll love it. 18 and up, which you, birthday boy, will officially be at midnight."

Ian's stomach flipped at the suggestion, nervous butterflies taking flight. "I don't know, guys. A gay bar? Isn't that kind of... a lot? For

my first time out?" His voice took on a sheepish quality, insecurity creeping back in.

"You don't have to do anything you're not ready for," Amelia reassured him, her hand finding his again, steady and warm.

"Actually, maybe he does," Shawnee cut in, her tone sharper than usual. "How long are you gonna make yourself small, Mitchell? At some point you just gotta jump."

"Shawnee—" Amelia started, her voice taking on that careful, diplomatic quality.

"What? I'm just saying. We've been waiting for him to be ready for four years."

"I've been waiting for me to be ready for eighteen years," Ian said quietly.

His friends fell silent.

Amelia broke the quiet. "Ian? You've spent so long hiding, trying to make yourself smaller. Don't you think it's time to take up some space? To be around people who get it, who've walked this road before you?"

Ian looked at each of his friends—the people who'd known him at his weirdest, his most vulnerable, and loved him through it all. Their faces showed nothing but support and excitement for him. A grin spread across his face, slow at first, then dazzling.

"Fuck it!" he said, the profanity tasting strange but liberating on his tongue. "You know what? Let's do it! Let's go to Menjo's!"

As the group celebrated under the oak tree, two male voices calling Ian's name from the parking lot interrupted their joyous moment.

"Who the hell is that?" Shawnee said, shielding her eyes from the sun as she squinted toward the parking lot.

They looked up to see Gavin and Derek leaning against Derek's blue Trans Am, waving their arms to get their attention. The sight of them sent a jolt through Ian's system—partly from the surprise of seeing his brother and Derek, but mostly from the timing. He'd just come out to his friends, and now here was Derek, the subject of so many of his secret thoughts and dreams.

"Oh, yeah!" Ian remembered, his hand flying to his forehead. "I've gotta go to the mall with Gavin and Derek to get fitted in our tuxedos for the wedding."

"Oh, my God!" Amelia said, putting her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide with recognition. "Is that Derek Lawson?"

Shawnee's eyes widened with excitement, a mischievous gleam entering them. "Oh my God, Ian! This is huge." She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. "So... does this mean you've got a thing with Derek Lawson?"

Ian's face flushed bright red, the heat spreading from his cheeks down his neck. "As if!" he exclaimed, a little too quickly. "Derek's like... way out of my league." The words came out defensive, betraying the very feelings he was trying to deny.

Renee and Amelia exchanged knowing glances, not entirely convinced by Ian's denial. Their raised eyebrows and suppressed smiles said everything their words didn't.

"Come on, Ian," Amelia pressed gently. "We've seen the way you look at him."

Ian fidgeted with the hem of his shirt, the fabric bunching between his fingers. "Guys, seriously. Derek's just... he's Gavin's best friend. That's all." The lie tasted bitter on his tongue, especially fresh on the heels of the truth he'd just shared.

"Uh-huh," Renee said, her tone playful. "And I'm just the Queen of England." She made a show of adjusting an imaginary crown on her head.

Ian laughed it off, his hand gestures becoming more animated as he tried to deflect. "Derek Lawson is like a divine being compared to us mere mortals. He's literally all that and a bag of chips," he joked, falling back on humor to mask his vulnerability. "I could put on a thong, bend over and dance to 'Hootchie Mama' four inches from his face, and he still wouldn't give me a second glance."

The mental image made his friends burst into laughter, effectively changing the subject, just as Ian had intended.

As they made their way to the parking lot, Ian felt a mix of emotions—excitement for the night ahead, nervousness about the tuxedo fitting, and a lingering fear about coming out to his family. But for now, surrounded by the love and acceptance of his friends, he felt ready to face whatever came next.

Renee's eyes sparkled with excitement as they walked.

"Guys, the world is our oyster now! We could backpack through Europe, or start a band, or invent the next big website. The possibilities are endless!"

As Ian and his friends approached the parking lot, the afternoon sun cast long shadows across the asphalt. The air was thick with the excitement of summer beginning and high school ending, a collective energy that seemed to make even the mundane shimmer with possibility.

Gavin and Derek stood leaning against Derek's sleek black Trans Am, a vehicle that had become something of a legend among the students of Grosse Pointe High. The car gleamed in the sunlight, as meticulously maintained as its owner's appearance.

Ian's heart raced as they drew closer, the rapid-fire pulsing almost painful against his ribs. He hadn't seen Derek in months, and the

sight of him now—casual yet impossibly handsome in a worn leather jacket and faded jeans—made Ian's breath catch in his throat. The breeze slightly tousled Derek's dark hair, and his piercing blue eyes seemed to light up as they landed on Ian. For a moment, Derek's confident smile faltered, replaced by a look of genuine warmth that felt meant only for Ian.

Ian's breath caught—not just at the sight of Derek, but at the way the afternoon light caught his features created a composition that Ian's musician's brain automatically tried to score. Something in a minor key, with an aching crescendo.

"Hello, you lovely young ladies," Gavin called out, grinning broadly, his arms spreading wide in theatrical welcome. "And my second favorite brother, Ian."

Ian raised an eyebrow, finding refuge in their familiar banter. "Second favorite? Isaac's suddenly taken the top spot?"

"What can I say? The kid's got charm," Gavin teased, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "You know I'm kidding, Ian." He reached out to ruffle Ian's hair, a gesture that would have annoyed Ian any other day but now felt like a blessed normalcy amid all the day's emotional upheaval.

The girls smiled and waved, but Ian found himself frozen in place, his eyes locked with Derek's. For a moment, it felt like the rest of the world faded away, the background noise receding until all Ian could hear was his own heartbeat and all he could see was Derek's face, those blue eyes studying him with an intensity that made his skin prickle with awareness.

Derek pushed himself off the car and took a step forward, his gaze never leaving Ian's face. The movement was fluid, almost predatory in its grace.

"Hey, Ian," he said softly, a warm smile spreading across his features. "It's been a while. You've... changed." As he spoke, Derek's eyes traveled across Ian's face, lingering on details—the sharper line of his jaw, the way he held himself differently, shoulders back instead of hunched. Something flickered in Derek's expression, there and gone too quickly to name.

Ian felt heat flood his cheeks, the blush impossible to hide. Had he changed? He supposed he had grown taller, his features sharper, less boyish. But surely Derek couldn't see the monumental shift that had just occurred beneath the old oak tree? The weight that had been lifted from his shoulders, making him stand straighter, breathe easier?

"Hi, Derek," Ian managed to reply, his voice barely above a whisper. He cleared his throat and tried again, willing strength into his words. "Yeah, it's been a minute. You look... good."

Derek's smile widened, the corners of his eyes crinkling in a way that made Ian's heart stutter. For a moment, Ian could have sworn

he saw a flicker of something—appreciation? Interest?—in those mesmerizing blue eyes. But surely that was just his imagination running wild, his newly acknowledged desires coloring his perception.

Shawnee, ever observant, glanced between Ian and Derek with a knowing smirk that Ian pretended not to see.

"So, Ian," Gavin said, breaking the moment, his voice cheerfully oblivious to the tension crackling between his best friend and his brother. "Do you guys feel any different? Being high school graduates now, and all?"

Derek chuckled, finally tearing his gaze away from Ian to address the group. The sound was rich and warm, wrapping around Ian like a tangible caress. "It's surreal, isn't it? One day you're trying to sneak into R-rated movies, the next you're legally allowed to vote. Time's a trip, isn't it, Ian?"

The question seemed casual, but there was something in Derek's tone that suggested he was asking about more than just graduation—as if he sensed the seismic shifts occurring in Ian's life.

"Speaking of which," Gavin moved to throw an arm around Ian's shoulders, the weight of it both comforting and grounding, "we've gotta steal this guy for a bit. Tuxedo fittings wait for no man, not even on graduation day."

Ian playfully shrugged off Gavin's arm, using the motion to create some distance, space to breathe. "As if I'd miss the chance to see you try on a monkey suit." The familiar teasing helped center him, a reminder that amid all the changes, some things remained constant.

As Gavin pulled Ian towards the car, Derek's eyes followed them, the intensity of his gaze almost tangible on Ian's skin. "Ladies, need a lift? Fair warning: my car's idea of 'spacious' is 'sardine can chic'. But hey, at least you'll be riding in style, right?" His tone was playful, but there was a genuine offer beneath the banter.

Shawnee jingled her car keys, the sound cheerful and metallic. "Thanks, Derek. As much as we'd all love to hit the town in your love-mobile, I've got my trusty steed right over there." She pointed to her well-used Honda Civic, adorned with numerous bumper stickers proclaiming various political causes.

Ian hugged each of his friends goodbye, the embrace lingering a beat longer than usual, charged with the shared secret and the promise of tonight's adventure. As he pulled away from Renee, she whispered in his ear, too low for anyone else to hear: "I saw that. He couldn't take his eyes off you."

Ian gave her a warning look, but his heart leapt at her words, treacherous hope blooming despite his best efforts to quash it.

As Ian climbed into the backseat of the Trans Am, he caught Derek watching him in the rearview mirror. Their eyes met once more, and Ian felt a jolt of electricity run through him, a current of connection

that seemed to transcend the physical space between them. Derek's hand hesitated on the gearshift, his fingers tapping into an uneven rhythm before he finally put the key in the ignition.

As they settled into the car, Gavin turned to Ian in the backseat, his expression bright with brotherly affection. "So, any wild plans for tonight? Please tell me you're not just going to sit at home watching musicals again."

Ian felt his face flush, remembering his earlier conversation with his friends. The irony wasn't lost on him—that this question should come now, when he was planning perhaps the wildest night of his life so far. "Actually, I am going out."

Gavin's eyebrows shot up in surprise, his mouth forming a perfect 'O'.

"Really? My introverted middle brother, venturing into the wild? I'm shocked." His tone was teasing, but there was genuine pleasure in it too, as if he was happy to see Ian stepping outside his comfort zone.

"Oh, shut up," Ian grumbled, but there was no real heat in his words. A small smile played at the corners of his mouth, unable to completely hide his own excitement about the night ahead.

Gavin twisted in his seat to really look at his brother, something shifting in his expression. "You okay, Ian? You seem... I don't know. Different today."

Ian's heart stuttered. Did Gavin know? Could he tell?

"Different good or different bad?" he managed.

"Different... lighter, maybe?" Gavin's brow furrowed, like he was trying to solve a puzzle. "Whatever it is, it looks good on you, little brother."

In the rearview mirror, Derek's eyes met Ian's again, questioning.

Gavin laughed, then added more seriously, "Hey, whatever you do, just be safe, okay? And call me if you need anything. I mean it." The brotherly concern in his voice was touching, a reminder of the bond they shared despite their differences.

"Thanks, Gav." Ian meant it, gratitude washing through him for this simple, unconditional support.

As Derek started the engine and pulled away, Ian watched his friends grow smaller in the side mirror. They were huddled together, excitedly discussing something—probably the night's plans. Ian couldn't help but smile, feeling a mix of nervousness and exhilaration about what lay ahead.

In the front seat, Derek and Gavin fell into easy conversation, their friendship evident in the comfortable way they switched between topics, finishing each other's sentences and laughing at half-formed

jokes. But Ian noticed Derek's eyes flicking to the rearview mirror more often than necessary, finding Ian's gaze each time.

Derek adjusted the rearview mirror for what had to be the twentieth time.

Stop looking at him.

He immediately dropped his gaze back to the road.

The problem wasn't Ian. Ian was sitting in the backseat doing absolutely nothing wrong.

The problem was Derek's own brain.

For months, he'd been policing every stray thought, every moment of unwanted awareness. If Ian walked into a room, Derek looked somewhere else. If a thought crossed his mind, he shoved it aside before it could take shape. He'd drawn boundaries so aggressively that sometimes he felt ridiculous for it.

And yet his eyes flicked to the mirror again.

When had Little Mitchell stopped being little?

The thought surfaced before he could stop it.

Derek grimaced and looked away.

Dangerous. Don't do this.

He knew the exact moment the alarm bells had started ringing. Two months ago at Gavin's birthday dinner, Ian had laughed at something Hillary said, and for the briefest second Derek had noticed him differently.

The realization had horrified him.

Not because he'd acted on it. He hadn't.

Not because he *wanted* to act on it. He *didn't*.

But because once the thought existed, he couldn't unknow it.

For eight weeks he'd treated it like a fire that needed smothering. He'd avoided being alone with Ian whenever possible. Kept conversations casual. Kept his distance. Reminded himself, over and over, exactly who Ian was.

Gavin's little brother.

Seventeen.

Off limits.

End of discussion.

Most days that was enough.

Today, for some reason, it wasn't.

Maybe it was because Ian seemed different. More confident. More comfortable in his own skin. Maybe it was because Derek had spent months pretending he hadn't noticed the change at all.

Whatever the reason, he didn't like the way his thoughts kept drifting back toward territory he'd already decided was forbidden.

Derek tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

You're Gavin's best friend. He's seventeen. Stop it.

The thought ended there.

No argument.

No justification.

Just the familiar reminder of where the line was and the certainty that he had no intention of crossing it.

"You okay up there?" Ian's voice called from the backseat.

Derek blinked, grateful for the interruption.

"Yeah, Lane." He forced an easy smile and kept his eyes on the road. "Just thinking about that tuxedo fitting. Gavin's going to look like a penguin."

But in the rearview mirror, their eyes met again, and Derek saw something in Ian's gaze that made his breath catch—something aware and searching that definitely hadn't been there last summer.

Stop looking at him, Derek commanded himself again.

He looked anyway.

Each time their gazes met, Ian felt the same spark, that same unnameable tension that seemed to vibrate between them. At one point, Derek's hand moved to adjust the mirror, and for a split second, his fingers brushed against it in a way that seemed almost like a caress, as if he could touch Ian through the reflection.

As they drove towards the mall, Ian leaned his head against the cool glass of the window, his mind racing with possibilities. He had just come out to his friends, was about to celebrate his birthday in a gay club, and now found himself hyper-aware of every move Derek made. It was as if the world had shifted on its axis, revealing new dimensions he had never dared to consider before.

As they approached the mall, Derek hit a small pothole, causing the car to jolt. Ian instinctively reached out to steady himself, his hand accidentally landing on Derek's shoulder. The touch lasted only a second, but through the thin fabric of Derek's t-shirt, Ian could feel the warmth of his skin, the solid muscle beneath. His fingers tingled from the contact, and he quickly withdrew, but not before noticing how Derek's grip tightened on the steering wheel, his knuckles whitening momentarily.

As Derek's eyes met Ian's in the rearview mirror for what felt like the hundredth time, Ian felt his heart skip a beat. He'd always had a crush on Derek from afar, but now, having finally admitted his sexuality to himself and his friends, those feelings seemed to intensify tenfold, becoming impossible to ignore.

Every small movement Derek made—the way his fingers tapped on the steering wheel, the slight furrow of his brow as he concentrated on the road—seemed magnified in Ian's perception. He wondered what it would be like to run his fingers through Derek's

tousled hair, to feel those strong arms around him, those big hands caressing his body...

Stop it, Ian, he thought to himself. *No, don't stop.*

But with each thrilling thought came a wave of guilt. This was Gavin's best friend, practically family. And even if that wasn't an issue, why would someone like Derek ever look twice at him? Ian felt simultaneously too young, too inexperienced, and somehow ancient with the weight of his secret.

As the car hit another bump, causing Ian to grip the seat tightly, he couldn't help but imagine a different scenario—one where Derek's hand reached back to steady him, their fingers intertwining...

Ian shook his head, trying to dispel the fantasy. He was getting ahead of himself. Coming out was one thing, but pursuing these feelings for Derek? That was a whole other level of complicated.

As Derek parked his shiny Trans Am, a sharp beeping sound cut through the air, making everyone jump. Gavin fumbled for his pager, squinting at the small screen, his brow furrowing in concern. "That's weird," he muttered, his earlier buoyancy diminishing.

"What is it?" Derek asked, his eyes flicking to Gavin, genuine concern replacing his usual easy confidence.

"It's from Hillary. 911-555-0171. Must be urgent if she's paging me." The worry in Gavin's voice was palpable, his fingers already reaching for the door handle.

Ian felt a chill run down his spine. Was something wrong with the wedding plans? Or was it something more serious? The possibility cast a shadow over his earlier euphoria.

As they pulled into the mall parking lot, Ian noticed a familiar car a few spots down—Alex's red Mustang. His stomach dropped, the earlier confrontation still fresh in his mind. What was Alex doing here? Would he try something again, with Gavin and Derek present? The thought sent a wave of anxiety through him.

Derek turned off the engine and turned to Gavin, his expression solemn. "Maybe you should call Hillary back before we go in?"

Gavin nodded, looking worried. "Yeah, good idea. There's a pay phone by the entrance. I'll be quick."

Gavin swiftly emerged from the car, carefully closing the door behind him. Reaching into his pocket for change, he strode purposefully towards the row of payphones next to the entrance of the bustling mall. With a quick flick of his wrist, he retrieved some coins as he approached the first phone.

Derek followed suit, stepping out of the vehicle and pushing his seat forward to create

more space for Ian to exit gracefully. The leather creaked as he moved, the sound oddly intimate in the enclosed space.

Ian grabbed onto the seatbelt to hoist himself out of the car, but his hand slipped and he awkwardly tumbled back inside, his coordination deserting him at the worst possible moment. He landed with an ungraceful thud, his cheeks heating with embarrassment.

Derek watched Ian's struggle with barely contained laughter, his blue eyes dancing with amusement. "Whoa there, Ian! I didn't realize we were auditioning for 'Cirque du Soleil: Backseat Edition'. Need a hand, or should I grab some popcorn and enjoy the show?"

The gentle teasing only made Ian's blush deepen, but there was something comforting in its familiarity—this was how Derek had always treated him, with affectionate ribbing that never crossed into cruelty.

Struggling to contain his embarrassment and laughter, Ian tentatively grasped the seatbelt again, attempting to pull himself out. But his hand slipped again, and he fell back into the car seat, frustration mounting.

"Jeez, Lane," Derek teased with a smirk, using his pet name for Ian. "Some things never change."

As Derek leaned in again and reached for him, Ian's brain short-circuited, all coherent thought scattering like startled birds.

Don't think about his muscles, don't think about his muscles bulging under his t-shirt at this very second. Don't think about how it would feel to have him on top of you, kissing you, and placing your palms on his massive chest, he chanted internally. Think about... grandma's dentures. Yeah, that's it.

Derek's hand enveloped Ian's completely, warm and solid and sure. His palm was slightly calloused but gentle as he gripped Ian's fingers, the contrast sending shivers up Ian's arm.

The simple touch sent sparks of electricity through Ian's entire body, each point of contact between their palms feeling like a separate revelation. Time seemed to slow as Derek pulled him up, the movement bringing them briefly face-to-face. Close enough that Ian could see the flecks of darker blue in Derek's eyes, could feel the ghost of his breath against his cheek, could smell that familiar cologne that had haunted his dreams.

For a heartbeat that felt like forever, they stood there, Derek's hand still wrapped around Ian's, their bodies separated by inches that felt like miles and yet too close all at once. The late afternoon sun caught in Derek's hair, turning the black strands almost blue, and Ian fought the urge to reach up and touch them, to see if they felt as soft as they looked.

He managed a wobbly smile, trying to diffuse the tension that seemed to crackle in the air between them. "Thanks, Derek. I guess gravity and I are still mortal enemies."

Once Ian was steady on his feet, Derek let go with a proud grin on his face and ruffled Ian's hair playfully. The gesture was simultaneously brotherly and something more, a touch that lingered just a fraction longer than necessary. The sun caught Derek's perfectly conditioned hair just right, highlighting the subtle blue-black sheen, making him look like he'd stepped out of a fashion magazine. Ian couldn't help but feel a pang of desire before forcibly redirecting his thoughts.

Ian hummed under his breath—a nervous habit, a few bars of something in a minor key that he didn't even realize he was doing.

Derek's head tilted slightly, recognizing the melody: "Losing My Religion."

The song that had been playing that night at the mall.

As they reached the pay phones, they stood a few feet away, waiting for Gavin to finish his call with Hillary. The distance between them felt charged, as if the air itself had become a conductor for the electricity Ian felt whenever he was near Derek.

Derek turned to Ian with a casual smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "So, Ian, how does it feel to be done with high school? Man, I remember when I was your age, getting ready for college. You must be, what, almost 18 now?"

The question landed like a slap.

Ian's throat closed. The words—I turn eighteen tomorrow, I turn eighteen tomorrow at midnight, tomorrow is my birthday—stacked up behind his teeth, desperate to escape. His mouth opened.

Say it. Just say it.

But then he looked at Derek's face, at the genuine confusion there, the casual way he'd thrown out "almost 18" like Ian's birthday wasn't something he'd celebrated every year for the past decade. Like Ian hadn't spent his tenth birthday with Derek teaching him to ride a bike. His thirteenth with Derek taking him to his first concert. His fifteenth with Derek driving him and his friends to the movies because Ian was too shy to ask anyone else.

Had those moments meant nothing? Had Ian always been just Gavin's little brother, a responsibility Derek tolerated out of friendship?

The realization crystalized with brutal clarity: he was invisible to Derek. Not worth remembering. Not important enough for Derek to have marked tomorrow's date in his mind, despite a decade of shared birthdays.

"Almost," Ian heard himself say, the word tasting like ash. "Yeah."

Derek nodded, already turning his attention back to Gavin, already moving on from a question that meant nothing to him and everything to Ian.

Ian felt something crack inside his chest. It wasn't the dramatic shattering of heartbreak he'd read about in books or heard in songs. It was quieter than that. More final. Like the last candle going out in a room, leaving only darkness.

All day, he'd been celebrating. Coming out to his friends, planning his big night at Menjo's, feeling brave and seen and finally, finally real. But here, he was nobody again.

Just Little Mitchell.

Just Gavin's brother.

Not even worth a birthday wish.

The bitter irony wasn't lost on him—he'd just spent the afternoon being celebrated, accepted, loved by his friends for exactly who he was. And here, with the person whose approval he craved most, he might as well not exist.

He almost said it. God, he almost said it. The words pressed against his lips:

"Actually, I turn eighteen tomorrow. Tomorrow at midnight. You gave me a first edition of 'The Phantom Tollbooth' for my fifteenth birthday because I mentioned it was my favorite book when I was eleven and you remembered. You remembered."

But he didn't.

Because if they cared—if Derek cared—they would have remembered on their own.

Ian swallowed the words down and stared out the window, watching the familiar streets of Grosse Pointe blur past. Tomorrow, he would turn eighteen. Tomorrow, he would step into adulthood. Tomorrow, he would dance at Menjo's and be brave and visible and proud.

But right now, in this moment, he had never felt more invisible in his entire life.

While they stood waiting for Gavin, Ian's mind whirled with conflicting emotions. The excitement of graduating and coming out to his friends, the disappointment of his forgotten birthday, and the nervousness about being around Derek—it all swirled together, leaving him feeling off-balance and anxious, as if he were standing on shifting sand.

Gavin returned, his face a mix of confusion and mild panic. "So, uh, apparently I'm on a top-secret mission to procure... 'lady supplies'." He lowered his voice to a stage whisper, glancing around as if sharing state secrets. "I feel like I'm in a spy movie. 'Operation Crimson Tide' is a go. Anyone know the code word for tampons?"

They all laughed at Gavin's joke, the tension broken momentarily. The sound of their shared laughter seemed to reset something, to bring them back to the easy camaraderie they'd always shared.

It was so Gavin—turning tension into humor, making everyone comfortable. Where Derek commanded a room, Gavin warmed it. Where Derek protected through strength, Gavin protected through making people laugh.

But as they walked towards the mall entrance, Ian couldn't shake the feeling that something significant was about to happen. It felt like the universe was conspiring to make this day unforgettable, layering revelation upon revelation, emotion upon emotion.

Little did Ian know that the events set in motion today, culminating in his secret plans for tonight, would challenge everything he thought he knew about himself, about Derek, and about the nature of love itself.

6 - Fitting In

The expansive corridors of Lakeside Mall swelled with a Friday afternoon symphony—footfalls on polished tile, the rise and fall of overlapping conversations, occasional bursts of teenage laughter echoing against storefront glass. Madonna's sultry vocals from her latest "Bedtime Stories" album spilled from Sam Goody's entrance, mingling with the warm, cinnamon-sugar perfume of Cinnabon that hung in the air like a childhood memory. The mall existed in its own temporal dimension—a place where time stretched like pulled taffy on a summer day, where minutes dissolved into the artificial daylight of fluorescent bulbs.

Groups of teenagers clustered near the food court in constellations of flannel and denim, their laughter punctuated by the metallic clink of chair legs against tile. Couples drifted past display windows, fingers loosely interlaced, pausing occasionally to admire some glittering object behind glass barriers.

Near KB Toys, a circle of boys huddled around the NBA Jam arcade cabinet like ancient worshippers before a sacred altar. Their ritual chants of "He's on fire!" rose above the ambient hum of commerce. Nearby, a cluster of girls at Claire's Accessories tested slapping bracelets against wrists and tried on chokers, their giggles forming ripples in the sea of mall noise.

The air carried a distinctive blend—buttered pretzels, over-brewed coffee, the synthetic leather of new shoes, and the faint desperation of parents navigating stroller-laden paths through the weekend crowd. Soccer moms moved with determined efficiency, credit cards ready like drawn weapons, expressions set with the grim resolve of warriors facing battle.

It was into this sensory maelstrom that Ian, Derek, and Gavin ventured, making a beeline for Sacchi's Formal Wear. They'd secured a coveted appointment for tuxedo fittings—a small miracle given how close they were cutting it to Gavin's rapidly approaching wedding date.

Derek ducked as a cluster of tweens nearly decapitated him with their wildly gesticulating arms. "Geez," he grumbled, his broad shoulders hunching protectively, "I haven't seen this much unbridled chaos since senior prom. At least then, the hormone-fueled maniacs were contained in one room."

Gavin rolled his eyes with theatrical exaggeration. "After graduation, Derek developed an acute allergy to anything less fabulous than himself," he stage-whispered to Ian. "I heard he once broke out in hives just looking at a clearance rack."

The comment pulled a laugh from Ian, the sound surprising him with its ease. Since the oak tree confession earlier that day, he'd felt

lighter somehow, as if the truth he'd carried for so long had physically weighed him down.

Derek's jaw dropped in mock outrage. "Says the guy who spent our senior year of high school already spending weekends in the frat house at U of M." He raked his fingers through his dark hair—a habitual gesture that Ian found himself tracking with embarrassing attention. "You were the one just pining to get away from all the lowly peasants."

"You two are disgusting," Ian laughed, shaking his head. "It's like you never left high school!" The familiar banter was comforting, a rhythm he'd known his entire life—Gavin and Derek, the two celestial bodies around which his world had always orbited.

Derek's eyes sparked with mischief, the blue deepening like lakes in sudden sunlight. "That's rich coming from Mr. 'I'm Going to Subvert the System by Majoring in Postmodern Ennui...'" He slung an arm around Ian's shoulders, the casual touch sending electricity crackling across Ian's skin.

"Wrong again, Mr. Know-It-All!" Gavin interjected. "Ian took a year off to sing."

Derek stopped mid-stride, his expression shifting from teasing to genuine surprise. "Really?" He jogged the few steps back to Ian and swung his arm around Ian's shoulders again, the weight both comforting and torturous. "Ian, that's the coolest thing I've heard all day!"

Warmth bloomed across Ian's face, and he shrugged out from under Derek's embrace, both craving and fearing the contact. "Well, at least I'm aiming higher than your dream of finally making shift supervisor at Target," he quipped, desperate to mask the turbulence beneath his surface.

"Target is Plan B, baby!" Derek declared with a laugh that seemed to vibrate through the air. "I'm gonna be the biggest thing to hit the Detroit house music scene since—"

"—Since God begged you to please, for the love of everything, pick a different path?" Gavin interrupted, his brotherly eyeroll so practiced it could have won awards.

They continued their leisurely procession through the mall, footsteps falling into unconscious synchronicity. The three radiated a tangible bond—something forged in shared childhood adventures, summer nights, and the crucible of adolescent survival. Their frequent bursts of laughter and shorthand references marked them as a tribe of their own.

They moved with the ease of long familiarity, like brothers grown together from saplings to oaks. Yet beneath this flowing surface current, subtle undercurrents swirled—unseen but powerfully felt.

Derek's hand found its way to the small of Ian's back as they navigated a particularly dense crowd, the touch lingering a heartbeat

longer than necessary. Ian leaned infinitesimally into Derek's space when they paused near a fountain, a gesture so natural he didn't register it until he caught the faint notes of Derek's cologne—cedarwood and something citrusy that made him think of sunlit mornings.

As Gavin observed Derek and Ian's interactions, a peculiar sensation nagged at him—not quite discomfort, but the faint dissonance of a familiar melody played in a slightly different key. There was something altered in the way they looked at each other, a tension he couldn't quite classify. He'd always been protective of Ian, and Derek was practically his brother. Their easy rapport should have pleased him, but instead it struck a note that felt off-center. He pushed the thought aside, attributing it to wedding jitters and Hillary's tampon emergency.

As they approached the food court, where the neon signs of Sbarro and Hot Dog on a Stick glowed brightly, a familiar voice cut through the mall's ambient noise, stopping Ian in his tracks. The sound carried years of hallway taunts and parking lot threats, each one etched into his memory like scars.

"Well, well, *well*. If it isn't the Mitchell brothers and their pet fairy," Alex sneered, his arm draped possessively over his girlfriend's shoulders. Two of his jock friends flanked him, their postures mirroring Alex's aggressive stance.

Ian felt his stomach drop, but he forced himself to stand tall. Derek stepped forward, almost imperceptibly, his shoulder angling between Ian and Alex. The gesture was subtle but loaded with history—every confrontation, every threat, every moment Derek had stood as shield between Ian and harm.

"Alex Hoffman," Gavin nodded curtly, his tone carrying a warning. "Not *today*, man. We're just passing through."

Alex ignored Gavin, his gaze fixed on Ian. "So, Mitchell Junior, heard you're taking a year off to '*sing*,'" he said, making air quotes. "What's the matter? Couldn't find a nice glory hole to keep you busy?"

Ian straightened his spine, channeling his inner sass. "Wow, Alex, I'm impressed. You strung together a whole sentence without hurting yourself. Maybe there is hope for you beyond being a professional Neanderthal after all."

Alex's eyes narrowed dangerously. He took a step forward—and then something shifted in the air.

Gavin didn't move toward Alex.

He moved back.

One small, deliberate half-step to the side, his arms dropping to his sides, his posture going almost relaxed—the practiced ease of a man clearing a lane. He didn't say a word.

He didn't have to.

The message was written in every unhurried line of his body: go ahead. He'd seen Derek Lawson in motion before.

Alex Hoffman had absolutely no idea what he was inviting.

Derek smoothly intercepted, placing himself between Alex and Ian with the particular calm of someone who has never once needed to announce how dangerous he is. He didn't square up. Didn't puff out his chest. Just stood there, occupying the space between them with a kind of absolute stillness that was somehow more threatening than aggression. The air seemed to crackle with unspoken history.

"You're eighteen *this* time, Hoffman," Derek said, his voice pitched low enough that only their small circle could hear. The words carried weight, heavy with memory. "Are you ready to finish what you started all those years ago?" His smile was razor-sharp, all teeth and no warmth. "No coaches to save you now. No daddy's lawyers to clean up your mess."

The color drained from Alex's face, his cocky demeanor flickering like a candle in wind. Ian watched the transformation with a mix of satisfaction and unease, remembering that night years ago — Alex's slurs, Derek's controlled fury, the way violence had hung in the air like static before a storm. He'd forgotten, sometimes, in the years since — forgotten what Derek looked like when he wasn't trying to be gentle. This was the reminder. Derek wasn't standing there hoping Alex would back down. He was standing there hoping he wouldn't.

Gavin, still unhurried, still perfectly composed, glanced sideways at Alex's friends. Just a glance. Just long enough for them to understand that if this went sideways, the math was not in their favor. Then he looked back at Alex with something almost like pity.

"That '*fairy*,'" he said pleasantly, "will literally break your face."

Alex's girlfriend tugged at his arm. "Babe, come on. Let's just go," she pleaded, clearly uncomfortable with the situation.

For a moment, tension crackled in the air. Then Derek spoke again, his voice calm but with an edge of steel. "Coach isn't around to save your scholarship anymore. Back away... now."

The comment seemed to penetrate Alex's bravado. He scoffed, but took a step back. "Whatever. Enjoy your little fashion show, ladies," he sneered, allowing his girlfriend to pull him away.

As Alex and his cronies disappeared into the crowd, Ian let out a shaky breath. Derek's hand found its way to Ian's shoulder, squeezing gently. "You okay?" he asked softly.

Ian nodded, not trusting his voice. Gavin ruffled Ian's hair, a gesture of comfort. "Don't let that jerk get to you, little bro. He's not worth it."

As they walked away from Alex and his cronies, Ian's heart raced, a mix of anger and shame coursing through him. He wanted to turn back, to shout all the things he'd been holding inside for years. But he also wanted to run, to hide from the judgmental stares and cruel words. The memory of that first confrontation years ago played in his

mind — how young and scared he'd been then, how Derek had stepped in without hesitation, accepting the consequences without complaint.

Ian glanced at Derek, whose protective stance wasn't fully relaxed. A warmth spread through Ian's chest, battling with the guilt of finding comfort in his brother's best friend. He thought about the night ahead, his secret plans with his friends, and a flicker of excitement cut through his turmoil. Soon, he'd be in a place where he could truly be himself. The thought both thrilled and terrified him.

The lingering tension from Alex's confrontation clung to Ian like a second skin as they approached Sacchi's storefront. Through the polished windows, mannequins posed in eternal elegance, their tailored silhouettes a stark contrast to Ian's self-conscious slouch. He caught his reflection in the glass — disheveled hair, worn sneakers, the careful construction of casual indifference he'd perfected over years of high school survival — and felt the familiar tightening in his chest.

"Earth to Ian," Derek's voice cut through his spiral, warm and teasing. "You planning on standing out here all day, or are you gonna help me make sure your brother doesn't pick something that'll make him look like a backup dancer for MC Hammer?"

Ian managed a weak smile, but Derek wasn't fooled. He stepped closer, his voice dropping to a murmur that seemed to create a private bubble around them, despite Gavin's presence mere feet away.

"Hey," Derek said softly, his eyes finding Ian's in the reflection. "Don't let Alex live in your head rent-free. He's just another scared kid trying to make himself feel bigger by making others feel small."

The gentleness in Derek's voice, so at odds with his usual swagger, made Ian's heart stutter. He turned to face Derek, finding unexpected understanding in those dark eyes. For a moment, Ian wondered if Derek knew what it was like to wear a mask, to hide parts of yourself even from those you loved most.

They ducked into Sacchi's, leaving the mall's cacophony behind. The shop enveloped them in a different sensory experience — the crisp scent of expensive cologne, the gentle tinkling of Sinatra ballads floating from hidden speakers, the hushed reverence of a space dedicated to masculine elegance. A primly dressed woman with graying hair piled into an elegant chignon approached them, her professional smile stretched just a touch too tight.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. Welcome to Sacchi's. My name is Marianne. Which of you has the appointment?" she inquired, her voice carrying the cultured tones of old Detroit money.

Gavin stepped forward, alpha energy radiating from his broad shoulders despite the subtle sheen of nervous perspiration on his brow. "That would be all three of us, ma'am," he replied, assuming the mantle of responsible eldest brother with practiced ease. "I'm Gavin Mitchell — we have a four-thirty triple slot for fittings for myself, my best man and

one of my groomsmen. There will be three more, but they're getting their fittings at different locations."

Marianne consulted her leather-bound planner, manicured finger tracing down the page. "Ah, yes... The Mitchell-Beauchamp affair, June 17th." Her eyes lifted, a new sparkle of interest in them. "We've been looking forward to yours, Mr. Mitchell."

She ushered them through the showroom's refined environment—mahogany armoires, leather Chesterfield sofas, and ranks of tuxedos displayed behind glass cases like precious artifacts. The space smelled of cedar, leather polish, and the particular indefinable scent of expensive fabric.

As Gavin and Derek drifted to one side of the room, following the tailor behind a changing screen to begin their fittings, Ian hung back. His hands found refuge in the deep pockets of his worn chinos, shoulders hunching slightly as he became acutely conscious of how out of place he looked in this temple to traditional masculinity.

His eyes caught his reflection in the triptych of full-length mirrors: unbrushed hair tumbling across his forehead, ratty Chucks scuffed from years of anxious toe-tapping, the faded New Order t-shirt about as suited to these plush surroundings as a dandelion in a rose garden. He stuck out like a sore thumb that had been slammed in a car door.

"I'll bet you clean up nice when you're not actively trying to get arrested for a dress code violation," Derek's voice came from behind him, the teasing lilt carrying a surprising undercurrent of warmth.

Ian startled, turning to find Derek leaning against the doorframe of the changing room, arms crossed over his broad chest. There was a glint in his eyes—part challenge, part something softer that Ian didn't allow himself to interpret.

"Don't you have a fitting to get to, Superman?" Ian asked, the childhood nickname slipping out automatically, though his voice carried a slight tremor.

Derek's expression softened at the familiar name, just as it always did. He crossed the space between them in two fluid strides, hand settling at Ian's waist in a gesture so casual yet startlingly intimate that Ian's breath hitched audibly.

"What, and leave you to get into trouble all by your lonesome? Not a chance," Derek murmured, the words carrying a protective edge that made Ian's stomach flip like a gymnast.

They stood toe-to-toe now, close enough for Ian to catalog details he'd never noticed before—the woodsy notes of Derek's cologne, the tiny scar that nicked his jawline, the fan of dark lashes that any mascara company would kill to replicate. Derek's palm pressed into the

small of Ian's back, sending a shiver up his spine that had nothing to do with the tailor shop's aggressive air conditioning.

Derek leaned in, closing the space between them until Ian could count the flecks of darker blue in his eyes. His voice dropped to something low and intimate, meant only for Ian's ears. "Speaking of Superman... I couldn't help but notice that Batman poster on your bedroom wall last week."

Ian's breath caught. Derek had been in his room last week? His mind raced, trying to remember the state he'd left it in, what else Derek might have seen.

Derek's hand came up to rest against the mirror beside Ian's head, effectively caging him in without actually touching him. The gesture was casual enough that Gavin—still distracted by Marianne's fabric samples—wouldn't notice anything amiss. But Ian felt trapped in the best possible way, his heart hammering so hard he was certain Derek could hear it.

"After twelve years of being your Superman," Derek continued, his voice taking on a tone of wounded betrayal that didn't quite match the heat in his eyes, "you're really going to betray me for some guy who can't even fly without a gadget?"

Ian's cheeks flushed crimson, the heat spreading down his neck. Derek was so close that Ian could feel the warmth radiating from his body, could smell that intoxicating mix of cologne and something uniquely Derek. "It's not a betrayal! It's just... Batman's got some good storylines..."

"Good storylines?" Derek's free hand moved to Ian's shoulder, his thumb resting against Ian's collarbone in a touch that could have been casual but felt anything but. "Ian Thomas Lane, I have been your Superman since you were three years old."

Ian couldn't breathe properly. Derek's thumb was tracing small circles against his collarbone—so subtle that anyone watching would miss it, but Ian felt each movement like a brand. "I know, but—"

"I taught you how to 'fly' off the couch," Derek interrupted, leaning in another impossible inch. His voice had gone rough, almost husky. "I rescued you from bullies. I even wore that ridiculous cape to your sixth birthday party."

"You looked really cool in that cape," Ian managed, his voice embarrassingly breathy. He was hyperaware of every point where Derek's body heat touched his own, of the way Derek's eyes kept dropping to his lips before flicking back up.

"Don't try to distract me with compliments." Derek's thumb pressed more firmly against Ian's collarbone, and Ian's pulse jumped beneath his touch. Derek's eyes widened fractionally—he'd felt it. The knowledge that Derek could feel Ian's racing heart seemed to shift something in the air between them. "The point is, I've been putting in

the Superman work for twelve years, and suddenly you're hanging posters of a guy whose superpower is 'being really, really rich and emotionally unavailable.'"

Derek's gaze dropped to where his thumb rested against Ian's throat, watching the rapid flutter of Ian's pulse. When he looked back up, his eyes had darkened to storm-blue, and the playfulness had been replaced by something raw and searching.

"What does he have that I don't have?" The question came out quieter this time, stripped of its earlier humor. Derek's face was so close now that Ian could feel his breath against his cheek.

Ian's mind went blank. The honest answer—nothing, you have everything, you're everything—stuck in his throat. "Well, he does have that really cool car..."

Something flickered across Derek's face—disappointment maybe, or relief that Ian had deflected instead of acknowledging what was really happening between them. But he didn't pull away. If anything, he leaned closer, his lips now inches from Ian's ear.

"Excuse me?" Derek's breath ghosted against Ian's skin, making him shiver. "Did you just *insult* my Trans Am?" His voice had gone dangerous-soft, the kind of tone that made Ian's stomach flip. "My beautiful, sleek, black Trans Am that you've spent half your teenage years riding in?"

Ian could barely think past the sensation of Derek's breath on his neck, the solid warmth of him, the way his thumb was still tracing those maddening circles. "Your car is pretty amazing," he whispered, his own voice gone rough.

"Pretty amazing?" Derek pulled back just enough to look Ian in the eyes, his hand sliding from Ian's shoulder down his arm in a slow, deliberate caress before falling away. "Ian, that car has been the backdrop for some of your most important life moments."

The loss of Derek's touch felt like a physical ache. Ian's skin felt cold where Derek's hand had been, his body leaning forward unconsciously, seeking that warmth again.

"First day of high school? Trans Am." Derek began counting on his fingers, but his eyes never left Ian's face. "That time you needed to escape your disastrous haircut before school photos? Trans Am. Every single time you've needed a dramatic exit from family dinner? Trans Am."

His voice dropped again, rough and low. "And you're going to sit there and tell me the Batmobile is cooler?"

"I never said it was cooler..." Ian's voice came out barely above a whisper. They were still standing too close, the mirror cold against Ian's back, Derek's heat surrounding him from the front.

"The implication was there," Derek said, and now he was close again, his hand coming up to rest on the mirror beside Ian's head,

caging him in once more. "Superman doesn't abandon his people for some guy in a fancy mask who probably has more issues than a magazine subscription service."

Ian's eyes dropped to Derek's lips—he couldn't help it—and when he looked back up, Derek was staring at his mouth with an intensity that made Ian's knees weak.

"Derek?" Ian breathed, the question he couldn't quite form hanging between them.

For one suspended moment, Derek's eyes met his, and Ian saw everything he'd been too afraid to hope for written plainly on Derek's face—want, confusion, fear, desire, all warring for dominance. Derek's hand moved from the mirror, his fingers hovering near Ian's jaw as if he wanted to touch but didn't quite dare.

Then—

"Um...Derek?" Gavin's voice cut through the tension like a bucket of ice water. "As much fun as this superhero identity crisis is, I'd kind of like to get this show on the road before the turn of the century, if it's all the same to you?"

Derek jerked back as if burned, putting a professional distance between himself and Ian so quickly that Ian nearly stumbled forward. The loss of his proximity left Ian dizzy, disoriented, his body still thrumming with unfulfilled energy.

But Derek's eyes remained locked on Ian's for one more heartbeat, and the heat in them promised this conversation wasn't over.

"Sure thing, Gavin." Derek's voice came out rougher than usual, and he had to clear his throat. He turned to leave, but paused in the doorway, looking back over his shoulder. His eyes found Ian's in the mirror's reflection, and a devastating grin curved his lips. "But we're having a serious conversation about your poster choices later, Lane. And I expect that Batman picture will be gone by tomorrow."

His voice dropped to something that was almost a growl. "Superman doesn't share his number one fan."

The weight of Derek's words—and the possessive edge in his voice—lingered long after he slipped through the fitting room door, leaving Ian flushed, utterly disoriented, achingly aroused, and wondering if Derek realized he'd just essentially staked a claim on Ian in the most publicly private way possible.

And whether Ian minded as much as he should.
(*He didn't. God help him, he didn't mind at all.*)

*** * ***

"That kid's so lucky," Derek commented to Gavin as he took a seat next to him on the bench, their reflections multiplied in the surrounding mirrors. "Taking time off to just sing? I envy him." He

paused and chuckled, the sound warm with reminiscence. "Remember when we thought we'd start a band?"

"God, yeah. The Great Mitchell-Lawson Musical Revolution," Gavin replied, a genuine smile softening his features. "Sometimes I miss those days, you know? When anything seemed possible."

"Why'd you give it up?" Derek asked, his voice quieter now, touched with a rare seriousness. "You were good, Gav."

Gavin stared at his reflection, something vulnerable passing across his usually confident expression. "Responsibility. Family expectations. Someone had to be the sensible one," he answered, the words carrying the weight of paths not taken. "Don't get me wrong, I love dentistry. I do. But sometimes..."

"Sometimes you wonder 'what if?'" Derek finished for him, the question hanging between them like a shared secret.

"Yeah. Exactly." Gavin turned to his friend, their eyes meeting with the understanding that only comes from decades of friendship. "You never compromised, Derek. I admire that about you. Even when it cost you everything with your family."

"That wasn't bravery," Derek said, his gaze dropping momentarily. "I just couldn't live any other way."

"Maybe that's what bravery is."

Derek absorbed that thought, the words settling into the spaces between his ribs. After a moment of silence, he stood, straightening his shoulders as if shaking off a weight. "Is there a restroom around here?"

Gavin pointed toward the back of the shop. "Around that corner."

Derek flashed a charming smile before walking off toward the bathroom. "I'll be right back," he called over his shoulder, his casual tone masking the turmoil behind his easy grin.

Despite Gavin's good-natured prompting, Ian found himself lingering a moment longer by the mirrors, still dazed by his encounter with Derek. He shook his head slightly, as if trying to physically dispel the lingering sensation of Derek's hand at his waist, and stepped out into the shop's main area. The sight of Marianne conducting an efficient ballet of measurements and fabric swatches provided a welcome distraction from his internal chaos.

As they waited for Derek to return, Gavin nudged Ian's shoulder with his own. "You okay, little bro? You've seemed...I don't know, distant lately." His eyes, so like their father's, held genuine concern.

Ian forced a smile, hoping it reached his eyes. "I'm fine. Just... big changes, you know? Graduating, you getting married..." The half-truth tasted incomplete on his tongue, but it was easier than the whole complicated reality.

Gavin's expression softened, a hint of nostalgia crossing his features. "Yeah, I guess a lot has changed since we used to build forts in the backyard, huh?" He ruffled Ian's hair, a gesture that used to drive Ian crazy but now filled him with a bittersweet yearning for simpler times. "But hey, you know I'm always here for you, right? No matter what."

Ian nodded, the words he longed to say caught in his throat like fish bones. How could he tell Gavin now, after all these years, about the pain he'd hidden? About the new, terrifying feelings for Derek that seemed to grow stronger with each passing moment? Instead, he simply said, "I know, Gav. Thanks."

Before Gavin could press further, Marianne returned, her measuring tape draped around her neck like an exotic necklace. "So, which style are you looking for, Mr. Mitchell?" she asked, directing their attention back to the business at hand.

Gavin's focus shifted immediately to the array of tuxedo options, a calculating intensity replacing his earlier brotherly concern. "I want something timeless, yet modern," he began, his hands gesturing to emphasize each point. "Something that is going to make my grandfather proud, but that's not too stuffy for this generation. Something that says, 'I'm a responsible adult' but also 'I still know how to party.' You know, like James Bond meets The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air. Is that a thing?"

"You know, Gav, half the time I forget that your grandfathers are two separate entities," Derek chimed in, emerging from the restroom with perfect timing. "Which one are we talking about?"

Ian laughed, and Gavin chuckled, but his eyes never left the tuxedos, the shape of his future hovering just beyond the garments.

"Grandpa Bowers! You know how he always says 'The measure of a man isn't just in how he looks on his wedding day, but in how he makes his bride feel when she sees him waiting by the alter,'" Gavin retorted. "Just promise me you won't try to slip in any neon colors."

"Don't worry, boss man. I'll keep it classy," Derek assured him, the lightness in his voice a counterpoint to the intensity of his gaze when it flickered briefly to Ian.

Marianne watched their exchange with the amused patience of someone who had witnessed decades of pre-wedding jitters. She approached Gavin with a swatch of navy fabric, the color deep and rich as midnight. "This one's a classic. Elegant, yet it gives a nod to modern trends. What do you think, Mr. Mitchell?"

Gavin lifted the fabric, the ends of the swatch fluttering like the sails of a ship catching a distant wind. "I like it. It's a good start," he mused, his expression thoughtful.

"This one has more...energy," Derek suggested, gesturing to a modern cut hanging nearby. "It makes a statement."

Gavin raised an eyebrow, his expression skeptical. "Since when are you so fashion-forward?"

Derek shrugged, an elegant rise and fall of those broad shoulders. "My latest account is all about self-expression. Guess it's rubbing off on me."

"I think Derek's onto something there," Ian ventured, surprised to find himself agreeing with Derek's aesthetic sensibility.

Gavin watched the exchange between his brother and his best friend, a slight frown creasing his brow. There was something different in their dynamic today, a subtle shift in the electrical field between them. He shook off the thought, attributing it to wedding anxiety, but a nagging feeling persisted that something significant was changing right beneath his notice.

Marianne smiled, her professional mask softening at the edges. "Well, this is going to be one unforgettable wedding, Mr. Mitchell."

"That's the plan," Gavin nodded, determination etched on his face like a carving in stone.

What followed was a lively montage of trying on various styles and patterns of tuxedos—some garish enough to make a Vegas showgirl blush, others so elegantly understated they seemed to whisper class rather than shout it. The trio fell into an easy rhythm, their laughter and good-natured ribbing filling the formal shop with unexpected warmth.

At one point, Ian presented a particular combination to Gavin that made his brother's eyes widen with pleased surprise. "This," Gavin said simply, turning to examine his reflection from multiple angles. "This is it." Derek high-fived Ian in celebration, their palms connecting with a satisfying smack that seemed to linger in Ian's nerve endings long after the contact ended.

Soon it was Ian's turn for measurements. He stepped onto the small platform, self-consciousness returning as Marianne circled him with critical eyes and a tape measure in hand. Gavin and Derek stood behind him, their reflections bracketing his in the mirror, their continued banter about the "good old days" providing a soundtrack to the fitting.

The fabric of the chosen tuxedo whispered against Ian's skin as Marianne made her final adjustments. The mirror reflected back a version of himself he barely recognized—shoulders straight, chin lifted, the cut of the jacket emphasizing a quiet confidence he didn't know he possessed.

For eighteen years—well, almost eighteen years, his mind corrected bitterly—he'd been Little Mitchell. Gavin's brother. The quiet one. The sensitive one. The one who needed protecting. He'd worn that identity like an ill-fitting coat, letting it define the space he was allowed to occupy in the world.

But the person looking back at him now didn't look like someone who needed protecting.

The tuxedo's sharp lines transformed his slender frame into something elegant rather than fragile. The way the jacket sat on his shoulders made him look taller, more substantial. Even his posture had changed—sometime between this morning's final bell and this moment, he'd stopped trying to make himself invisible.

Ian studied his reflection with new eyes. The same green eyes that had watched Derek from afar for years, that had dropped in shame every time Alex Hoffman hurled a slur, that had filled with tears of relief under the oak tree just hours ago. But now they held something different. Not quite courage—not yet. But the possibility of it. The promise of it.

"You look like someone who matters," he whispered to his reflection, so quietly that even he barely heard it.

But it was Derek's reflection behind him that caught and held his attention, pulling his focus like gravity.

Derek leaned against the wall, watching Ian with an intensity that seemed to thicken the air between them. His arms were crossed, but his posture was anything but casual—he looked like a man who'd just discovered something that both thrilled and terrified him. Their eyes met in the mirror, and for a heartbeat that stretched into infinity, Ian saw something flash across Derek's face—a raw, unguarded expression that made Ian's pulse race and his hands tremble.

For one wild, impossible moment, Ian let himself imagine that Derek saw him the way Ian had always seen Derek. Not as Little Mitchell. Not as Gavin's baby brother. But as someone worth wanting.

The thought was intoxicating and terrifying in equal measure.

"Looking good, little brother," Gavin's voice shattered the moment like a stone through glass. He appeared beside Ian, proudly adjusting his own jacket cuffs, completely oblivious to the electric current that had been flowing between Ian and Derek. "Hillary's gonna flip when she sees how sharp her groomsmen clean up."

Ian forced a laugh, but his eyes strayed back to Derek's reflection. The older man had pushed off from the wall, his expression now carefully neutral, but Ian couldn't forget what he'd glimpsed in that unguarded moment.

It was like catching sight of a shooting star—gone too quickly to be sure of what you'd seen, but leaving you forever changed by the possibility.

And as Derek's mask slipped back into place, Ian realized something that made his stomach flip: he wasn't the only one hiding something. Whatever had just passed between them in that mirror, Derek had felt it too.

The question was—what were they going to do about it?

"Looks like I'm up next," Derek announced with his characteristic carefree tone, though something in his voice seemed strained to Ian's newly attentive ear.

Ian's eyes widened as Derek, with a casual disregard for propriety, pulled his t-shirt up and over his head in one fluid motion. The fluorescent lights of the shop played over the planes of Derek's muscular torso, highlighting every curve and dip of his physique. Ian felt his mouth go dry, the saliva evaporating as if he'd swallowed desert sand.

Derek's body was a masterpiece—shoulders broad and powerful, tapering down to a narrow waist. His biceps flexed with even the smallest movement, the result of years of disciplined training. Every muscle in his abdomen was clearly defined, rippling beneath taut skin with each breath. A light dusting of dark hair adorned his sternum, leading Ian's gaze inexorably downward to where it disappeared beneath the waistband of his jeans. As Ian's eyes traced the contours of Derek's form, he noticed a small scar just below Derek's collarbone—a pale reminder of some long-ago injury. It beckoned to him, igniting an almost overwhelming urge to reach out and trace its jagged edges with his fingertips.

Realizing he was staring, Ian quickly averted his eyes, heat rising to his cheeks in a flush he couldn't control. His heart hammered against his ribs like a caged bird seeking escape, and he prayed no one could hear how his breathing had quickened.

Derek, in the process of folding his shirt with uncharacteristic care, paused. His gaze lifted to Ian, noticing the younger man's flushed face and nervous fidgeting. A look of confusion crossed his features, followed quickly by something Ian couldn't quite identify—surprise? Understanding?

"You okay, Ian?" Derek asked, his voice pitched low enough that Gavin, engaged in a conversation with Marianne about pocket squares, couldn't overhear.

Ian nodded jerkily, not trusting himself to form coherent words. He shoved his hands into his pockets, trying to appear casual and failing spectacularly.

Derek's brow furrowed slightly. His eyes dropped to his own bare chest, then back to Ian, a realization dawning in his expression. Without another word, he grabbed the crisp white dress shirt from the hanger and headed for the small fitting room.

"I'll just... change in here," Derek said over his shoulder, disappearing behind the curtain.

Ian released a shaky breath, equal parts relieved and oddly disappointed. He caught sight of himself in one of the many mirrors—face flushed, eyes wide, looking thoroughly flustered.

This is dangerous, the voice in his head warned. This is Derek. Gavin's best friend. The guy who's been like a brother to you your entire life. It's just Derek. Just your brother's best friend, who happens to look like Michelangelo sculpted him and probably smells like rainbows and unicorn tears. Totally normal. Nothing to see here. Oh god, am I drooling?

But another voice—newer, braver, fed by this morning's revelation under the oak tree—whispered back:

He's also the guy who makes your heart race. The one who's starred in every daydream you've had since you were old enough to understand what wanting someone really meant. The one who defended you when no one else would, who remembered your favorite books, who looked at you just now like you were the only person in the room.

Ian pressed his palms against his thighs, trying to ground himself. His body still hummed with awareness, every nerve ending seemingly attuned to Derek's presence even behind the curtain. He could hear the rustle of fabric, imagine those strong hands buttoning that crisp white shirt, and his mouth went dry all over again.

Stop it. Stop it. Stop it.

But he couldn't stop the train of thought once it started. Couldn't stop remembering the scar below Derek's collarbone, the way the light had played across his chest, the trail of dark hair that led—

"Everything alright, dear?" Marianne's voice cut through his spiral, her knowing eyes suggesting she'd seen this exact scenario play out between young men more times than he could imagine.

Ian nodded too quickly, too emphatically. "Fine. Totally fine. Just... warm in here, isn't it?"

Marianne's lips curved in the smallest smile. "Indeed," she said, in a tone that suggested she understood far more than Ian was comfortable with.

The curtain rustled, and Ian's entire body went on high alert, preparing for Derek's emergence like a soldier awaiting orders he didn't know how to follow.

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Behind the fitting room curtain, Derek fumbled with the buttons on his dress shirt, his usually deft fingers clumsy with distraction. His mind raced faster than his heart, and both were setting record speeds.

Did that really just happen?

Was Ian Mitchell totally checking me out?!

Is Ian gay?!

The thought had honestly *never* crossed his mind before, but now it seemed glaringly *obvious*.

How did I not see it?!

The way Ian had looked at him just now, with that mixture of longing and embarrassment... Derek knew that look. He got it every time he took his shirt off when there were other gay guys around. He'd worn it himself, back when he was first coming to terms with his own sexuality.

He couldn't shake the image of Ian in that perfectly fitted tuxedo, the fabric accentuating his slender frame in ways that stirred feelings Derek couldn't quite understand—or rather, understood all too well and didn't want to acknowledge.

When had Gavin's little brother become so... hot? Not just cute...but unbelievably smoking hot?!

Derek shook his head, trying to dispel the thought. This was Ian, for Christ's sake. The kid he'd known since diapers, the little brother he'd never had. But today, something had shifted irrevocably. The way Ian's eyes lit up when he smiled, the quiet defiance in his voice when he stood up to Alex—it was like seeing him for the first time.

Seeing the man he had become for the first time...

A pang of guilt hit Derek with the force of a physical blow. What would Gavin think if he knew the direction of his best friend's thoughts? And wasn't Ian still just a kid? Seventeen, about to turn eighteen soon, right?

When is his birthday?

NO!

Stop right there, Lawson!

The five year age gap alone made this entire train of thought inappropriate, a voice of reason insisted. But another voice whispered that Ian wasn't a child anymore. He was on the cusp of adulthood, making his own decisions, following his own path.

Earlier that day at the diner, when Gavin had asked about Blake, his casual tone had belied the protective fury in his eyes. Derek knew that look well—it was the same expression Gavin wore whenever anyone threatened what he considered his to protect. Gavin might be his best friend, but he had always been a brother first—the same fierce loyalty that had driven him to beat up Tommy Wilson in third grade for pushing Ian off the swings, or threaten Alex Hoffman with bodily harm for bullying Ian that night at the mall years ago. It was this intense protectiveness that made Derek's growing attraction to Ian all the more complicated, a tangled knot of loyalty, desire, and fear.

Derek ran a hand through his hair, frustration tightening his jaw. Was this just some sort of rebound thing after the toxic disaster that was Blake? Or was it something deeper, something that had been there beneath the surface all along? As he'd watched Ian laugh at one of Gavin's jokes earlier, Derek had felt a pull in his chest he couldn't explain away. He had the sinking feeling that his life was about to get a lot more complicated than he'd bargained for.

"*Get it together, Lawson,*" he muttered to himself, the words barely audible even in the small confines of the fitting room. "*This is Ian. Gavin's brother. Off limits in every conceivable way.*"

But even as he tried to convince himself, Derek couldn't shake the memory of Ian's shy smile reflected in the mirror. Couldn't forget the electricity he'd felt when their eyes met, the silent current of something unspoken but powerfully felt. He took a deep breath, squaring his shoulders as if preparing for battle. Whatever these feelings were, he'd have to bury them deep. For Gavin's sake, for Ian's, and for his own sanity.

Adjusting his cuffs with more care than necessary, Derek prepared to rejoin the others, his expression schooled back into its customary easy charm.

He'd be the supportive friend.

The protective older brother figure.

Nothing more.

No matter how much a part of him might wish otherwise...

*** * ***

The drive back from the mall was quieter than the drive there.

Ian sat in the back seat of Derek's Trans Am, watching the familiar streets of Grosse Pointe blur past his window. The sun had begun its descent, painting the sky in shades of amber and rose that reminded him of the color that had flooded Derek's cheeks when their eyes met in the mirror.

In just a few hours, he would turn eighteen.

In just a few hours, he would walk into Menjo's with his friends and step into a version of himself he'd been too afraid to claim until today.

But right now, in this liminal space between who he'd been and who he was becoming, Ian allowed himself a moment of quiet reflection. His hand drifted to his chest, feeling his heartbeat—steady now, but still faster than normal. Still humming with the awareness of Derek just feet away in the driver's seat.

Through the rearview mirror, their eyes met for the briefest moment. Derek looked away first, but not before Ian caught something in his expression that made hope and terror bloom in equal measure in his chest.

Everything was changing. Had already changed. There was no going back to the safety of ignorance, no way to unfeel what he'd felt when Derek's hand touched his waist, when Derek's eyes had locked on his reflection with that raw, unguarded want. The visions he had of putting his lips on that perfect, muscled chest...

Tonight, Ian would dance in a place where he could be himself without fear.

But tomorrow?

Tomorrow, he would have to figure out what to do about the fact that he was in love with his brother's best friend.

And, unbeknownst to Ian, the fact that Derek—impossible, terrifying, wonderful Derek—might actually be falling back.

7 - The Aroma of Aging Grandparents

The Mitchell household buzzed with the particular symphony that only large family gatherings can create—the clink of good china being set with careful precision, the percussive thud of footfalls across hardwood, the rising and falling cadence of overlapping conversations. Sunlight filtered through the dining room's stained glass panels, casting kaleidoscope patterns across the polished mahogany table as dusk gradually transformed the light from gold to amber.

In the kitchen, Graham and Imogen moved in the synchronized dance of a couple who had prepared countless meals together. She reached for the serving dish just as he finished carving the roast; he stepped right as she moved left, their movements a choreography perfected over decades. The savory aroma of rosemary and garlic wove through the air, underscored by the buttery scent of fresh dinner rolls.

"The rolls need another two minutes," Imogen murmured, tucking a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. "Mother will notice if they're underdone."

Graham smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "Mother notices everything," he replied, his voice holding equal measures of affection and resigned acknowledgment.

In the living room, the television cast a blue-tinged glow over Isaac and Gwen, who sat cross-legged on the carpet, eyes fixed on the screen where animated characters engaged in colorful antics. The sound was turned low out of deference to the adults—a concession to propriety that Isaac resented but Gwen accepted as part of the mysterious code of grown-up gatherings.

The four grandparents occupied the room's armchairs, their voices a pleasant counterpoint to the muted television. Grandpa Mitchell was recounting a story about his latest fishing expedition, his hands gesturing expressively to illustrate the size of his catch—a size that grew with each retelling. Grandma Bowers nodded politely, though the slight arch of her eyebrow suggested amused skepticism.

The front door swung open with a familiar creak, admitting a rush of early evening air and the sound of laughter. Gavin entered first, his tall frame filling the doorway, followed by Derek and Ian, their faces bright with the lingering excitement of their excursion.

Gavin inhaled deeply, a mischievous glint sparking in his eyes. He stepped dramatically into the living room entryway, arms spread wide. "Ah, Ben-Gay and hard candies! The unmistakable aroma of aging grandparents! Quick, everyone, conceal the fine china and your estate plans!"

His words carried through the house, prompting a sharp "Gavin!" from Imogen in the kitchen. But before she could scold him further, Grandpa Mitchell's wry voice boomed from the living room.

"And I detect the unmistakable aroma of a boy who's about to marry someone way out of his league!"

The tension dissolved into laughter as the three young men made their way fully into the living room, where their grandparents were already rising to greet them. The transition from doorway to embraces happened in a fluid motion, years of family rituals making the movements as natural as breathing.

Gavin made a beeline for Grandma Mitchell, the living embodiment of everything a grandmother should be. Standing at 5'8" and 170 lbs, she exuded the particular warmth that seemed reserved exclusively for matriarchs. Her silver hair caught the light as she moved, the careful styling framing a face where each line told the story of a life filled with laughter. Her yellow and purple floral dress with matching yellow flats made her appear like a garden come to life, brightness in human form.

"Here comes the groom!" Grandma Mitchell exclaimed, her voice carrying the slight musical lilt that had remained from her childhood in Minnesota. "Oh, Gavin! Getting better looking every day!"

Gavin's arms encircled her in a gentle embrace, his broad frame dwarfing hers despite her substantial height. "Oh, Grandma Mitchell," he murmured against her hair, which smelled of lavender and the particular scent that Ian had always privately categorized as 'grandmother.' "So happy to see you."

Next to his wife, Grandpa Mitchell opened his arms wide, his 6-foot frame standing tall and proud. His white baseball cap declaring him the "World's Best Grandpa" sat at a jaunty angle over eyes that missed nothing. He wore a classic blue and green checkered short-sleeve button-down shirt that had likely been in rotation for summers spanning back to the late 1970s, paired with khaki shorts and comfortable brown loafers that had molded perfectly to his feet over years of wear.

"There he is! The man of the hour!" Grandpa Mitchell beamed, his voice carrying the distinctive gravel of a lifelong pipe smoker who had reluctantly given up the habit at his doctor's insistence.

Ian watched the scene unfold from a slight distance, his position a physical manifestation of the emotional space he often felt within the family orbit. The corner of his mouth lifted in a half-smile as Gavin charmed their grandparents with the easy confidence that had always seemed to come as naturally to him as breathing.

Memories washed over Ian like tide pools filling—summers spent trailing after his big brother, Gavin patiently teaching him to throw a perfect spiral, to hit a baseball just right so it sailed over the backyard fence. There had been no impatience then, no frustration with his younger brother's fumbling attempts. Just encouragement, protection, guidance.

But as they grew older, the gap between them had expanded into something more difficult to traverse. Gavin and Derek had graduated the year before Ian's freshman year, leaving him to navigate the treacherous waters of high school without their protective presence. While Gavin collected accolades and friends with enviable ease, Ian had retreated further into himself, swallowing the bitter pills of hallway taunts and locker-room shoves without complaint. Pride had kept him silent—pride and the shameful fear that admitting his weaknesses would somehow diminish him further in the family hierarchy.

Ian loved them all deeply—this was the undeniable truth that formed the foundation of his conflicted emotions. But beneath that love ran an undercurrent of isolation, the persistent feeling of being a puzzle piece from another box entirely. How would they react if they knew the truth about him? The question hung like a weight around his neck, compressing his lungs until each breath required conscious effort. As Gavin embraced their grandfather with unrestrained affection, Ian's gaze dropped to the hardwood floor, tracing the whorls in the grain as if they might contain answers to questions he dared not speak aloud.

Grandma Mitchell's keen eyes didn't miss the shadow that passed over her middle grandson's features. Her attention shifted to Derek, but it was a deliberate redirection, giving Ian a moment to compose himself without drawing attention to his discomfort.

With a twinkle in her eye that belied her years, she exclaimed, "But here is the handsomest of the handsome!"

Derek laughed, the sound rich and unrestrained. He stepped forward to embrace her, his muscular frame bending carefully to accommodate her smaller stature. "You're not wrong, Grandma Mitch," he replied, his tone suggesting that their exchange was a long-established routine between them.

"Derek, always a pleasure to see you," Grandpa Mitchell smiled, extending his hand, which Derek shook warmly before being pulled into a brief, back-slapping hug.

Watching Derek interact with his grandparents, Ian couldn't help but notice how seamlessly he fit into their family dynamic—more naturally, sometimes, than Ian himself felt he did. Derek had been Gavin's shadow for as long as Ian could remember, a presence so constant that he occupied a space somewhere between friend and family. The lines had blurred years ago, erased by countless shared meals, holiday celebrations, and summer vacations.

Grandma Mitchell then turned her attention to the youngest of the trio, her smile softening with the particular tenderness she always reserved for Ian.

"And Ian! Oh, Ian! You're a big boy now! All finished with high school!" Her hands found his face, palms cool against his cheeks in the

familiar gesture she'd been performing since he was old enough to stand on wobbly toddler legs.

"Congrats, Ian! We're so proud of you!" Grandpa Mitchell added, squeezing Ian's shoulder with affection that felt genuine and uncomplicated.

Ian hugged his grandparents, breathing in the comforting scent of his grandmother's perfume—the same brand she'd worn for forty years—and his grandfather's aftershave. The embrace filled him with conflicting emotions: genuine happiness at their affection, yet a hollow disappointment that they, too, had obviously forgotten his birthday. The omission stung all the more because of their usual meticulous attention to family milestones.

Nearby, Grandma and Grandpa Bowers waited with barely contained impatience for their turn to greet their grandsons. Grandma Bowers stood in sharp contrast to Grandma Mitchell, like comparing a sleek modern penthouse to a cozy country cottage. Her dyed black hair, styled into a sleek bob, framed a face where cosmetic interventions had waged a determined battle against time's march. She exuded confident sophistication in her trendy pantsuit, which Ian recognized as likely being from one of those designer collections his mother occasionally admired in magazines but never purchased.

The two grandmothers represented opposite poles of femininity—one embracing age with graceful acceptance, the other engaging in sophisticated resistance. Yet both commanded attention and respect in their distinctly different ways, their strength of character transcending their contrasting aesthetics.

Grandpa Bowers complemented his wife with his own brand of stylish confidence. He wore a light blue short-sleeve shirt that looked casually expensive, paired with perfectly pressed khaki shorts and a leather belt that probably cost more than Ian's entire wardrobe. His hair, grown out longer than most men his age would attempt, was combed back in a way that reminded Ian of those black-and-white photos of Hollywood stars from the 1950s. His neatly trimmed beard added to the impression of a man who had aged on his own terms, refusing to surrender his sense of self to conventional expectations of how a grandfather should look.

"Look at these boys!" Grandma Bowers exclaimed, her voice carrying the slight rasp of someone who had enjoyed both cigarettes and good whiskey for many decades. "Goodness, how the time has flown."

The three young men greeted the Mitchell family's maternal grandparents with the expected hugs and handshakes, the ritual playing out with the comfortable predictability of a scene rehearsed countless times over the years.

As the family reunion continued its well-worn patterns, the doorbell's distinctive chime announced Hillary's arrival. Gavin's face transformed at the sound, years falling away until he resembled nothing so much as a teenager anticipating a first date. He crossed the room in long strides, disappearing into the foyer.

When he returned moments later with Hillary at his side, the warm light from the chandelier seemed to intensify, as if responding to her presence. Ian had always thought his future sister-in-law possessed a particular luminosity that transcended mere physical beauty—though she had that in abundance, too. Standing tall at 5'9", with a slender figure of approximately 110 lbs, she moved with the graceful confidence of someone comfortable in her own skin. Her straight, light brown hair fell past her shoulders in loose waves that looked effortlessly perfect, framing delicate features that needed little enhancement from the minimal makeup she typically wore.

In one hand, she carried a bottle of wine that Ian suspected had been carefully selected rather than grabbed at random from a store shelf; in the other, she held what was clearly a homemade dessert, the presentation suggesting both skill and attention to detail. Ian noticed the approving glances exchanged between Imogen and both grandmothers—Hillary's thoughtful contributions to the gathering were duly noted and appreciated.

"Hillary, dear! So wonderful to see you," Grandma Mitchell exclaimed, moving forward to embrace her future granddaughter-in-law with genuine warmth.

Hillary returned the embrace with equal affection, but Ian didn't miss the momentary tightening of her shoulders—a nearly imperceptible bracing—before she relaxed into the circle of family greeting. The slight hesitation spoke volumes to Ian, who recognized in it his own moments of uncertainty within family gatherings.

The familiar warmth of acceptance washed over Hillary, yet beneath it ran a current of anxiety she couldn't quite suppress. The bustling energy of the Mitchell family—so different from the restrained interactions of her own upbringing—both drew her in and left her feeling slightly breathless, like stepping from an air-conditioned building into humid summer heat. Her eyes found Gavin across the room, his easy smile providing an anchor amid the swirl of activity. She smoothed her dress with her free hand, fingers brushing across the engagement ring that still sometimes felt foreign on her finger—a tangible reminder of the commitment she was about to make, the life she was choosing.

As she observed the Mitchell family dynamics unfolding around her—Imogen's efficient orchestration of the evening, Graham's quiet authority, the good-natured bickering between siblings—Hillary couldn't help but compare it to her own family's more formal

interactions. There was a warmth here, an unspoken understanding between family members that both attracted and intimidated her. She wondered, not for the first time, if she would ever feel as natural in this environment as Gavin did, or if she would always carry this sense of being a visitor in a foreign land, learning the customs but never quite becoming fluent in its unwritten language

As she moved to greet her future in-laws, Hillary took a deep breath, centering herself. In less than a week, this would be her family too. The thought both exhilarated and terrified her.

Ian watched the interaction with careful attention, noting the subtle interplay of emotions across Hillary's features. He recognized in her momentary hesitation an echo of his own feelings of displacement, of never quite fitting the expected mold. His eyes tracked Gavin's movement toward Hillary, the protective way his brother's hand settled at the small of her back, the silent reassurance in the gesture.

A familiar ache bloomed in Ian's chest—not jealousy of their relationship, but a longing for similar connection, for someone who would look at him with the open adoration Gavin directed at Hillary. He wanted to be seen, truly seen, by someone who would accept all the parts of himself he kept carefully hidden from the world. His gaze drifted unconsciously to Derek, who was laughing at something Grandpa Bowers had said, his head thrown back to expose the strong column of his throat.

Ian forced his attention elsewhere, focusing instead on the grandfather clock standing sentinel in the corner of the dining room. The antique timepiece had been a fixture in the Mitchell home for as long as he could remember, its steady ticking a constant backdrop to family gatherings, holiday celebrations, and quiet Sunday afternoons. Tonight, however, each tick seemed to resonate with unusual clarity, marking the inexorable approach of midnight with metronomic precision.

9:15 PM.

Less than three hours until midnight.

Less than three hours until he turned eighteen, until he could legally enter Menjo's.

The methodical swing of the pendulum felt like it was marking the final moments of his childhood, counting down to a threshold he both longed for and feared to cross. Each second that passed was one more toward a version of himself he had only dared imagine in private thoughts.

Ian tore his attention away from the clock's hypnotic movement, focusing instead on passing the mashed potatoes to Grandma Bowers, but the clock's steady rhythm continued to pulse through him like a second heartbeat, impossible to ignore completely.

Eight-year-old Gwen, having grown bored with sitting quietly, had slipped from her chair to tug at Ian's sleeve, her expression hopeful as she peered up at him. "Can we play Mario Kart later?" she asked, her voice carrying the particular wheedling tone children reserve for requests they suspect might be denied.

Before Ian could respond, Gavin reappeared, sweeping into the room with renewed energy. He scooped Gwen up in one fluid motion, twirling her around until her giggles filled the air. "Only if I get to play too, squirt!" he exclaimed, tickling her sides mercilessly.

Gwen squirmed in his grasp, her laughter interspersed with breathless protests. "Okay, okay!" she gasped between giggles. "But Ian has to be on my team. We always beat you guys!"

Ian felt a warmth bloom in his chest at Gwen's words—her simple, unquestioning inclusion of him in her world was a balm to the sense of separation he often felt within the family. No matter how distant he sometimes felt from Gavin, they shared an unshakeable bond in their love for their little sister.

The family reunion flowed around them, the current of conversation carrying them through the meal. The dining table, extended to its full impressive length, groaned under the weight of Imogen's culinary efforts. Steam rose from serving dishes, carrying the mingled aromas of roasted meats, fresh herbs, and butter-laden vegetables. Crystal glasses caught the light from the chandelier overhead, fracturing it into prismatic patterns that danced across the tablecloth.

Stories circulated like the dishes, passed from person to person, savored, added to, and passed again. Laughter punctuated the gentle murmur of voices, breaking through at regular intervals like waves against a shore. The upcoming wedding dominated many exchanges, plans and expectations woven through nearly every topic like golden threads through fabric.

In a momentary lull between conversations, Gwen leaned toward Ian, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Is Gavin going to move far away when he gets married?" The question carried a child's worried uncertainty, her small brow furrowing with concern.

Ian slipped an arm around her narrow shoulders, pulling her slightly closer. "No, squirt. He and Hillary are staying in town. You'll still see him all the time." He smiled down at her, adding gently, "You know this already..."

Gwen nodded, her expression clearing as quickly as it had clouded. "I just wanna double check. I like having both of my big brothers around." She paused, considering. "Even if Gavin is loud and you're quiet."

"What about Isaac?" Ian asked, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Gwen scrunched up her nose, the gesture transforming her features into a comical mask of disgust. "I don't care if I ever see him. He stinks."

Ian laughed, the sound genuine and unguarded in a way his laughter rarely was these days. The simple honesty of children was refreshing—an antidote to the layers of complication that seemed to accumulate with age.

The conversation shifted as Gavin launched into a detailed description of their honeymoon plans, his enthusiasm drawing the attention of the entire table. Isaac, seeing an opportunity to engage his older brother, piped up with a question that moved the discussion toward wedding preparations.

"Hey, bro, you're still gonna make time for our weekend workouts, right?" he asked, a hint of insecurity threading through his attempt at casual inquiry. "Can't let married life make you soft."

Gavin laughed, reaching across the table to ruffle Isaac's hair—a gesture that would have earned a scowl from the younger boy had it come from Ian, but which he accepted from Gavin with visible pleasure. "Wouldn't dream of it, little bro. Someone's gotta keep you in shape for football season."

Isaac beamed at the attention, then turned to Ian, his expression shifting into something more challenging. "You should join us sometime, Ian. Might help you bulk up a bit."

Ian forced a smile, the muscles in his face stiffening with the effort. The comment stung more than he wanted to admit, touching on insecurities he'd carried since childhood about his slender build.

"Thanks, but I'll stick to my music," he replied, keeping his tone light despite the weight settling in his stomach.

"Suit yourself," Isaac shrugged, his attention already shifting back to Gavin. "Oh, Gavin, did I tell you about the new play Coach is thinking of running?"

As Isaac launched into a detailed explanation of football strategies, his eyes alight with enthusiasm, Ian felt himself fading into the background of the conversation. The familiar sense of being an outsider in his own family resurfaced, a quiet but persistent ache that he had learned to live with but never quite managed to overcome.

"So, Ian," Isaac continued, his mouth full of mashed potatoes, "now that you're done with high school, are you finally gonna do something cool? Like, I don't know, join a band or something?"

Ian raised an eyebrow, the question pulling him back into the conversation. "I thought you said music wasn't cool."

"Well, yeah, choir isn't," Isaac rolled his eyes as if explaining something obvious. "But being in a band? That's different. Could help you score some points with the ladies... or whoever," he added with a

smirk that suggested the "whoever" wasn't as throwaway as he pretended.

Ian felt his throat tighten, wondering if the comment contained actual knowledge or if it was just Isaac's typical needling. Before he could formulate a response, Gavin intervened.

"Leave him alone, Isaac," he said, his tone light but carrying an undercurrent of authority that immediately checked their younger brother's teasing. "Not everyone needs to be a jock to be cool."

Isaac's face lit up at Gavin's attention, the reprimand seemingly less important than the fact of being acknowledged. "Yeah, but it doesn't hurt," he countered, quick to recover. "Hey, Gav, think you could help me with my throwing arm this weekend?"

As Isaac steered the conversation back to football, Ian found himself retreating once again to the periphery. His fingers wrapped around his water glass, condensation cooling his palm as he took a slow sip, using the motion to mask his discomfort.

Derek, who had been listening to Grandpa Bowers recount a particularly animated anecdote about his golf game, shifted his attention subtly toward Ian. Their eyes met across the table—a brief connection that held for three heartbeats longer than casual glances typically do.

In that suspended moment, something passed between them that Ian couldn't name but felt deep in his chest. Derek's expression softened almost imperceptibly, a wordless acknowledgment that seemed to say I see you, even when no one else does.

Then Grandma Mitchell asked Derek about his latest DJ gig, and the moment fractured, but not before Ian felt the warmth of being truly noticed settle like a hand on his shoulder.

As dinner progressed, Ian became increasingly aware of Derek's presence across the table—not in the abstract way one notices another person in a room, but with an acute consciousness of every movement, every shift in posture, every time Derek's laugh rang out or his voice dropped to that particular register that seemed to resonate in Ian's chest.

When Ian finally dared to glance back up, Derek was engaged in conversation with Grandpa Bowers, laughing at something the older man had said. But even as Derek's attention seemed focused elsewhere, Ian noticed the way Derek's fingers drummed against his thigh—a nervous energy that suggested he was perhaps not as unaffected as he appeared.

The realization sent another wave of heat through Ian's body, and he found himself studying Derek's profile—the strong line of his jaw, the way his Adam's apple moved when he swallowed, the barely visible pulse point at his throat.

As if feeling the weight of Ian's stare, Derek's eyes suddenly cut back to him, catching Ian in the act of watching. For a suspended heartbeat, neither looked away. Derek's lips curved into the smallest smile—not the broad, charming grin he gave everyone else, but something subtle and knowing that made Ian's stomach flip.

Then Grandma Mitchell asked Hillary a question, and the spell broke. But Ian remained acutely aware of Derek for the rest of the meal—every laugh, every gesture, every time Derek's hand moved or his voice dropped or his eyes found Ian's across the table in moments that felt deliberately stolen.

"Hillary, dear, I don't think I've ever heard the full story of how you and Gavin met," she said, her voice carrying the particular blend of politeness and determination that made it clear she expected a detailed response. "Care to indulge an old woman's nosiness?"

Hillary laughed, the sound light and melodious. She set down her fork, settling into storytelling mode with the ease of someone accustomed to commanding a room's attention. "I transferred from New York in 10th grade. Picture it: New York City girl lands in Grosse Pointe. I went from dodging taxis to dodging deer." Her hands moved expressively as she spoke, punctuating her words. "My first day, I asked where the nearest subway was. They thought I was craving sandwiches!"

"New York City?" Grandpa Bowers perked up, leaning forward slightly. "That must have been a big change."

Hillary nodded, her expression softening with remembered adjustment. "Huge. I was determined to make my mark, though. First thing I did was audition for 'Ladies Only,' the school's all-girl doo-wop group."

"Did you make it?" Gwen asked, wide-eyed with admiration for this suddenly exotic future sister-in-law.

"She did *more* than make it," Gavin interjected, pride evident in his voice as he gazed at Hillary. "She became their lead vocalist within a month."

Hillary blushed, the color rising delicately across her cheeks. "Anyway, that's where the real story begins. I met Gavin and Derek in Algebra class. Let's just say, numbers weren't exactly their strong suit."

Derek groaned playfully, pressing a hand to his heart in mock offense. "Don't remind me. I still have nightmares about quadratic equations."

"But it wasn't all bad," Hillary continued, her expression softening as she glanced at Gavin. "I was immediately drawn to him. There was just something about him..."

"My dashing good looks and charming personality?" Gavin suggested, wagging his eyebrows in an exaggerated fashion that drew laughter from around the table.

Hillary's eyes crinkled with affection as she shook her head. "Keep telling yourself that, babe," she teased. "They were right in the front row and center of Mr. Brindle's third hour Algebra II class—the class clowns, always making jokes and keeping everyone laughing... even Mr. Brindle!"

"Someone had to. I don't think that man had laughed in the twenty years before that!" Gavin defended himself, gesturing with his fork for emphasis.

"Or probably since!" Derek added, prompting another round of laughter from the assembled family.

"I got seated right behind Derek," Hillary continued, her eyes taking on a distant quality as she revisited the memory. "So, I had a perfect view of Gavin from my seat."

As Hillary reminisced about their high school days, a wave of nostalgia swept across her features. Behind her composed exterior, her mind conjured vivid images of those formative days—the stolen glances across classrooms, whispered conversations between bells, the fluttering sensation in her stomach whenever Gavin flashed that particular smile meant only for her. It had been a simpler time, filled with the sweet anticipation of first love and unburdened by the complex responsibilities of adulthood that now occupied so much of their shared life.

Gavin interjected with a chuckle, his expression mirroring her nostalgic journey.

"You mean you had a perfect view of me passing notes to Derek and trying not to get caught by Mr. Brindle."

Hillary playfully nudged him, her eyes sparkling with affection. "And there I was, thinking you were actually paying attention in class."

Gavin shrugged with exaggerated nonchalance. "Hey, I always made sure to ace the tests. That's what really matters, right?"

The dining room seemed to hum with the warmth of shared history, the stories they told serving as touchstones to a past that shaped their present.

Hillary continued her tale, her hands moving expressively as she spoke. "But here's the kicker—I discovered these two could actually sing. And I mean really sing." Her expression brightened with remembered surprise. "So, I made it my personal mission to get them to join the jazz choir. For the first week or so of my 'campaign', they wouldn't even hear me talk about it."

"Hey, in our defense, jazz and doo-wop weren't exactly considered cool back then," Derek protested, though his smile suggested he had no regrets about eventually giving in.

Ian leaned forward, genuinely interested despite himself. "So that's how the best 'Take Five' ever started?"

Hillary nodded, her expression brightening at Ian's engagement. "Well, not immediately. These two knuckleheads," she gestured between Gavin and Derek, "were convinced they'd be laughed off stage if they auditioned. Ms. Badino had been trying for years to start a male version of 'Ladies Only,' but no matter how hard she tried, she could never get more than three, maybe four, guys to audition."

"In my opinion, you seriously need at least four strong male voices for a doo-wop group to sound proper," Derek added, his gaze shifting to Ian for confirmation, a silent acknowledgment of their shared musical understanding.

Derek was rewarded with a nod of agreement from Ian before Hillary resumed her story.

"When word got out that these two were auditioning, guys started signing up left and right. Suddenly, it was the cool thing to do."

Ian couldn't help but smile as his imagination painted the scene—fifteen-year-old Derek Lawson standing nervously on the stage of the choir room, clad in his blue and gold Grosse Pointe High School football jersey with "LAWSON #1" boldly printed across the back. The mental image sent a wave of warmth through him, intensifying his already complicated feelings for his brother's best friend.

"What did you sing for your audition, Derek?" he asked, unable to keep a hint of eagerness from his voice.

"I sang *Dreamlover* by Bobby Darrin," Derek replied, his expression softening slightly as he held Ian's gaze.

Ian's smile widened, genuine enthusiasm breaking through his earlier reserve. "That's a *great* song. I'm sure it showed off your vocal range." He leaned forward slightly, unconsciously gravitating toward Derek as he spoke.

Derek shrugged, an embarrassed smile revealing dimples that Ian found himself staring at for a beat too long. "It went well," he said with uncharacteristic modesty.

"Oh, *stop* it!" Gavin interjected, wadding up his napkin and tossing it across the table at Derek. "He was amazing. Blew *everyone* away."

Derek chuckled sheepishly at Gavin's praise, a faint blush tinting his cheeks as he recalled the nerve-wracking experience that had ultimately changed the trajectory of his high school years.

The memory unfolded in his mind's eye with cinematic clarity—the choir room buzzing with nervous energy as students filtered in and out, each emerging with expressions ranging from relief to disappointment. Derek had stood just outside the door, his hands fidgeting with the hem of his jersey, the

bold "LAWSON #1" across his back suddenly feeling like a weight rather than a badge of honor.

Ms. Badino's voice had called out the next name on her list, the sound muffled through the closed door but still causing his stomach to tighten with apprehension. What was he doing there? This wasn't his world—he was Derek Lawson, quarterback, not some choir boy risking ridicule from his teammates.

But then he remembered Hillary's encouraging smile, Gavin's supportive clap on his shoulder. Taking a deep breath, he had straightened his posture, shoulders back, chin lifted—the same stance he adopted before taking the field.

"Derek Lawson?" Ms. Badino's voice had been clear that time, no door to muffle his name.

With one last steadying breath, Derek had pushed open the door and stepped into the choir room. The space had seemed smaller than he remembered from his required music appreciation class, more intimate somehow. Ms. Badino sat at the piano, her kind eyes meeting his as he approached.

"Welcome, Derek," she had said warmly. "What will you be singing for us today?"

Derek had cleared his throat, extending the sheet music with a hand he hoped didn't visibly tremble. "'Dreamlover by Bobby Darrin, ma'am."

Ms. Badino nodded approvingly, arranging the music before her. "Excellent choice. Are you ready?"

As she played the opening chords, Derek had closed his eyes briefly, centering himself. When he opened them again, he wasn't in the choir room anymore; he was back in his bedroom, singing along to his father's old records, lost in the music that had been a private passion for years.

□ "Every night I hope and pray
A dream lover will come my way
Someone to hold in my arms
And know the magic of their charms" □

His voice, usually confident when calling plays on the football field, had started soft and slightly unsteady. But as he continued, it had grown stronger, filling the room with rich, smooth tones that surprised even him.

□ "Dream lover, where are you
With a love, oh, so true
And the hand that I can hold
To feel you near as I grow old" □

As he hit the chorus, something magical had happened. The nervousness melted away, replaced by pure joy. His body relaxed, his voice soared, and he found himself smiling as he sang.

□ "Cause I want—Someone
To call—My own
I want a dream lover
So I don't have to dream alone" □

When the last note faded, Derek had opened his eyes, almost surprised to find himself back in the choir room. Ms. Badino sat at the piano, her expression one of astonished pleasure.

"Derek," she had said slowly, a smile spreading across her face, "that was... incredible. I had no idea you had such a voice."

The pride and excitement that had washed over him in that moment had been unlike anything he'd experienced on the football field—a different kind of achievement, one that was entirely his own.

As he left the choir room, he had spotted Gavin waiting anxiously in the hallway and flashed him a thumbs up. In that moment, Derek knew something fundamental had changed. He had discovered a part of himself previously unknown, a passion that would carry him through the remainder of his high school years and beyond.

Ian tried to hide the surge of admiration he felt as Derek recounted his performance, the flush spreading up his neck betraying his emotions despite his best efforts. He knew his reaction was inappropriate—this was his brother's best friend, for heaven's sake—but every time Derek smiled at him, Ian couldn't suppress the flutter of excitement that rose in his chest.

Desperate to divert attention from his obvious reaction to Derek, Ian turned to Gavin. "What about you? What did you sing?"

"'Water Runs Dry' by Boyz II Men," Gavin replied, though his attention remained partially on Derek, a fond expression suggesting he was still lost in their shared memories.

"And you killed it," Derek added, his gaze returning to Ian. "He sounded amazing. I remember listening just outside the choir room door, feeling so proud of my best friend."

Gavin's eyes softened with nostalgia as he looked at Derek. "This, coming from Mr. Perfect over there," he laughed before continuing. "It was one of the greatest feelings walking into school the next day and rushing to the choir room door to see our names on the list."

Derek leaned back in his chair, tilting his head slightly as memories washed over him. "It was me, Gavin, Barry Timlinson, Danny Boyde, and Steve Larimer," he recalled, a wistful smile playing across his

features. "Five boys who had nothing in common but the fact that we could carry a tune, yet somehow formed an unbeatable doo-wop quintet that could make any audience sway and sing along. Each of us brought our own unique flair and style to the group, creating a harmonious blend that still echoes in my heart to this day."

As Derek spoke, his eyes alight with remembered joy, Ian found himself captivated. He'd heard these stories before—the legend of Take Five was well-established in family lore—but never like this, never with the dawning realization that each word, each laugh, each gesture Derek made sent a current of electricity through him. What he felt was more than admiration, more than looking up to his brother's cool friend. But what exactly it was, Ian couldn't—or wouldn't—fully acknowledge, even to himself.

He swallowed hard, forcing his attention back to the story, trying to ignore the way his pulse quickened whenever Derek's gaze met his across the table.

Gavin's eyes brightened with excitement as he picked up the thread of the story. "Do you remember our very first performance? We were all filled with nerves, knowing we were performing for the toughest critics in existence: hundreds of judgmental high school kids..."

The memory unfurled like a film reel, vivid and immediate despite the passing years.

The gymnasium had buzzed with the chaotic energy of hundreds of teenagers, their excited chatter echoing off the high ceilings. Gavin, Derek, Barry, Danny, and Steve had huddled behind the makeshift stage, a nervous energy pulsing between them like an electric current.

"I can't believe we're doing this," Chris had muttered, adjusting his bow tie for what seemed like the hundredth time in five minutes.

"Hey, it's gonna be great," Gavin had reassured, though his own hands trembled slightly as he straightened his jacket.

Derek had peered around the curtain, his eyes widening at the sea of faces filling the gymnasium. "Guys, the whole school is out there."

"No backing out now," Danny had said, his usual bravado noticeably absent from his voice.

Steve, always the peacemaker, had placed a steadying hand on Danny's shoulder. "We've got this. Remember how good we sounded in practice?"

Ms. Badino had appeared then, her face a mixture of excitement and maternal concern. "You're on in two minutes, boys. Break a leg!"

As they took their positions on stage, the curtain slowly rising to reveal them to the waiting audience, the crowd's reaction had been immediate and harsh. Snickers and whispers rippled through the gymnasium like a wave.

"Look at those outfits!"

"Is this some kind of joke?"

"What are they, the Nerd Squad?"

Gavin had felt his cheeks burn with embarrassment, but a glance at Derek had steadied him. Derek's subtle nod had reminded him why they were there—not for the crowd or their judgments, but for the music they all loved.

As the opening notes of "The Book of Love" filled the gym, something magical happened. Derek's rich baritone cut through the noise, silencing the whispers. Gavin's tenor blended perfectly, adding depth and emotion to the lyrics. Chris, Danny, and Steve's harmonies wove around the lead vocals, creating a tapestry of sound that was impossible to ignore or ridicule.

Slowly, the snickers died away, replaced by looks of awe and appreciation. By the time they hit the chorus, the entire gym had fallen silent, every eye fixed on the five boys on stage.

As they moved into the bridge, Gavin noticed something extraordinary happening in the audience. Couples were drawing closer together, swaying to the music. Some teachers were discreetly wiping away tears. Even the football team, who had been among the loudest mockers at the start, were now nodding along appreciatively.

When the final note faded away, there was a moment of stunned silence that stretched like an eternity. Then, as if a dam had burst, the gym erupted in thunderous applause. Cheers and whistles filled the air as the entire student body rose to their feet in a standing ovation.

Gavin had looked at his friends, seeing his own shock and joy mirrored in their faces. They had done it. They had won over the toughest crowd imaginable with nothing but harmony and heart.

As they left the stage, still dazed by the response, Ms. Badino had met them with tears in her eyes. "Boys," she had said, her voice thick with emotion, "that was extraordinary."

In that moment, riding high on adrenaline and the rush of their unexpected triumph, the five members of the very first Take Five had known they were witnessing the birth of something special—something that could transcend the usual high school cliques and stereotypes. They had found their voice, and people were ready to listen.

"Aww, you guys," Hillary sighed, her expression softened with remembered wonder. "It really was something special."

Gavin beamed with pride as he continued. "Derek was our lead vocalist—and rightfully so. He was the glue that held us together. He could charm anyone with his velvety voice and effortless charisma. It was no wonder every girl at school was swooning over him."

Derek chuckled modestly, color rising to his cheeks at the praise. "Oh, come on, Gavin. You were the heartthrob with your killer smile and 'class clown' personality."

"And the rest, as they say, is history," Hillary concluded, her smile warm with affection. "Three consecutive state gold medals. Not bad for a couple of reluctant singers, huh?"

Grandpa Mitchell whistled low, impressed. "I knew you boys were good, but I did not know Hillary was the mastermind behind it all."

"That's our Hillary," Gavin said softly, looking at her with undisguised adoration. "Always pushing us to be our best selves."

Ian's fingers found the slim digital watch on his wrist, a habit he'd developed over the years when anxiety began to creep in around the edges of his composure. The luminous display read 10:07 PM.

One hour and fifty-three minutes until midnight.

One hour and fifty-three minutes until he was officially eighteen and could walk through the doors of Menjo's without fear of being turned away.

He ran his thumb over the smooth face of the watch, mentally calculating how long it would take to get ready, how long the drive would be, how many precious minutes remained of his childhood. As the conversation flowed around him, stories of Take Five's glory days providing a comfortable background noise, that countdown ticked away in the back of his mind like a metronome, a quiet but insistent reminder that tonight, everything would change.

A wave of bittersweet emotion washed over Ian as he listened to Derek's captivating tales from the past. For the first time, he viewed his brother's friend through a different lens—not just as the cool older guy he had always looked up to, but as someone with a life and experiences entirely his own, a complexity Ian could only begin to imagine.

There was a tug in Ian's chest, a sense of wistfulness for not having been there to witness those moments firsthand. He couldn't quite name the feeling—it wasn't jealousy or resentment, but something more complex, a longing for connection to a time he could never access.

As he watched Derek across the table, laughing at Hillary's animated retelling of their high school escapades, Ian couldn't help but admire the way his eyes crinkled at the corners, how his smile transformed his entire face from handsome to breathtaking.

Their gazes locked for a moment, and Derek's expression softened into one of pure warmth and gentle understanding. In that instant, Ian felt his heart stutter in his chest, his thoughts racing as he tried to make sense of the emotions swirling inside him.

He quickly tore his gaze away, unable to process the intensity of his feelings toward Derek. All these years, he had looked at him with admiration and respect, but now...now it felt like something more complicated was brewing beneath the surface. Ian gave a small shake of

his head, pushing aside any further contemplation for another time when he was ready—or brave enough—to confront these feelings.

Instead, he shifted his focus to his brother and Hillary, observing the easy affection between them—the way Gavin's hand rested at the small of her back, how her body inclined toward his as naturally as a flower turning toward the sun. Ian felt a familiar ache in his chest, a mixture of happiness for his brother and a longing for something similar in his own life. The possibility that he might someday experience that kind of open, accepted affection seemed remote, a dream rather than a realistic hope.

As the evening progressed, Ian felt increasingly restless. The walls of the dining room seemed to close in on him, the weight of his family's unspoken expectations pressing against his chest until each breath required conscious effort. He needed to escape, to be around people who knew the real him—or at least, the version of himself he had shared with them earlier that day beneath the oak tree. The thought of the night ahead with his friends filled him with a mixture of excitement and terror. Tonight could change everything, for better or worse.

The serving dishes had been emptied, dessert plates cleared away, and coffee poured into delicate cups that had been wedding gifts to his grandparents decades ago. Ian shifted in his chair, picking at an invisible thread on his pants and casting frequent glances at the grandfather clock.

10:42 PM.

Time was slipping away, the opportunity for adventure with it.

He cleared his throat, the sound unnaturally loud in a momentary lull in conversation. "Mom, Dad," he began, trying to keep his voice casual despite the nervous energy coursing through him, "I hate to cut short this riveting discussion about Aunt Mildred's bunion surgery, but... if it's alright with you, I was wondering if I could be excused? I promised the girls we'd celebrate our last day of school tonight. You know, before we all turn into responsible adults and start discussing things like... *bunions*."

A hint of nervous humor colored his words, betraying his excitement for the planned celebration despite his attempt at nonchalance.

Imogen and Graham exchanged a glance, a silent communication honed by years of marriage. Their expressions softened into identical indulgent smiles as they turned back to Ian.

"Of course, sweetie," Imogen said tenderly. "Just make sure you don't stay out too late, okay? 1 AM, all right?"

Ian nodded, relief washing over him. A quick mental calculation told him he would likely be home closer to 2 AM, but the consequences seemed trivial compared to the importance of tonight's

adventure. He would face whatever punishment came his way without complaint.

As he stood to leave, Derek also rose from his chair, the movement drawing all eyes to him. The scrape of his chair against the hardwood seemed unnaturally loud in the momentary lull of conversation.

"I think I'm going to head out too," he announced, stretching in a way that drew Ian's eyes to the strip of skin exposed as his shirt rode up slightly. "It's been a long day, and I'm exhausted. I need to get some sleep."

The family bid their goodnights to Derek with varying degrees of affection. As Ian headed toward the stairs, Derek made his way to the foyer—but not before positioning himself directly in Ian's path, forcing the younger man to either stop or brush past him.

Ian stopped, his breath hitching as he found himself suddenly standing close enough to Derek to smell his cologne—that familiar scent of cedarwood and something darker that had haunted Ian's thoughts for months.

"Have fun, Ian," Derek said, his voice pitched low enough that it wouldn't carry to the dining room. His hand reached out, ostensibly to touch Ian's shoulder in a casual goodbye, but his fingers landed instead at the juncture where Ian's neck met his shoulder, his thumb pressing gently against Ian's pulse point.

Derek's eyes widened almost imperceptibly—he could feel Ian's racing heartbeat beneath his thumb.

"I'll be seeing you soon," Derek continued, and the words felt loaded with promise rather than casual farewell. His thumb stroked once across Ian's skin before his hand fell away, the loss of contact leaving Ian feeling strangely bereft.

"I'll be seeing you soon," Derek continued, and the words felt loaded with promise rather than casual farewell. His thumb stroked once across Ian's skin before his hand fell away, the loss of contact leaving Ian feeling strangely bereft.

"See you later, Derek," Ian managed, his voice coming out rougher than intended. "Today was... fun."

The corner of Derek's mouth lifted in a half-smile that looked almost dangerous. "Fun," he repeated, as if tasting the word. "Yeah. It was." His eyes dropped briefly to Ian's lips before returning to meet his gaze. "Really fun."

The moment stretched between them, taut as a wire pulled to its breaking point. Ian's lips parted, though he had no idea what he would say. His body swayed forward unconsciously, drawn toward Derek like a compass finding north.

Derek's pupils dilated, his jaw tightening as if he was physically restraining himself from something. His hand twitched at his side, fingers curling into a fist before relaxing again.

"Derek?" Grandma Mitchell's voice called from the dining room. "Thank you again for carrying all our things upstairs!"

The spell shattered.

Derek stepped back quickly, putting proper distance between them, though his eyes remained locked on Ian's for one more loaded second. "You're welcome, Grandma Mitch!" he called back, his voice steady despite the heat still burning in his gaze.

With a smile, a nod, and a final wave that somehow felt like a caress despite the lack of physical contact, Derek disappeared through the front door.

Ian stood frozen in the foyer, staring after him for far too long. His shoulder still burned where Derek had touched him, his pulse still hammered where Derek's thumb had rested. He raised his own hand to the spot, pressing his fingers where Derek's had been, trying to recapture the sensation.

When he finally remembered himself and turned toward the stairs, his legs felt unsteady, his entire body humming with an energy he couldn't name but desperately wanted more of.

Upstairs, Ian stood before his closet, heart racing with the particular mixture of terror and exhilaration that accompanied stepping into the unknown. He needed to look good tonight—not just acceptable, but memorable. He wanted to walk into Menjo's feeling confident, like someone who belonged there rather than a nervous teenager testing the boundaries of his identity.

His hand hovered over the soft blue sweater hanging among his limited wardrobe options. Derek's offhand compliment echoed in his mind like a favorite song stuck on repeat: "That color really brings out your eyes, Lane." The casual observation, delivered months ago, had transformed the simple garment into something almost talismanic in Ian's mind.

He pulled it from the hanger, a small act of defiance against the image his family had of him. Tonight, he decided with sudden resolve, he would be brave. He would be himself, consequences be damned. He paired the sweater with his tightest pair of gray jeans and his only pair of black shoes that weren't athletic sneakers—loafers purchased for his cousin's wedding last summer that still felt stiff from lack of wear.

In the bathroom, Ian ran a hand through his perpetually tousled sandy blonde hair with a sigh of frustration. He reached for the styling gel, a product he rarely used, and worked a small amount between his palms until it warmed. With tentative movements, he began to style his hair, pushing it back and to the side in a way he'd seen Derek do countless times.

As he worked, his fingers seemed to find a rhythm of their own, sculpting his hair into a style that somehow suited his features better than his usual careless arrangement. When he finally looked up, he froze, staring at his reflection with genuine surprise. The person looking back at him seemed older, more confident—dare he say, even handsome? The swept-back style emphasized his cheekbones and brought out the green in his eyes, transforming his face from boyish to mature in ways he hadn't thought possible.

For a moment, he hardly recognized himself. A slow smile spread across his face, transforming his features further. "Not bad, Mitchell," he murmured, a newfound confidence blooming in his chest that he had rarely experienced outside of singing. As he turned to leave, he caught his reflection one last time, and for the first time in longer than he could remember, he genuinely liked what he saw.

Back in his room, the digital clock on his bedside table glowed 10:42 PM in red numerals.

"In seventy-eight minutes, I'll be eighteen," he whispered to his reflection in the full-length mirror on his closet door, testing the words. "Everything changes tonight."

The person in the mirror looked ready for that change in a way Ian had never seen before. It wasn't just the styled hair or the carefully chosen outfit—there was something in his eyes, a determination, a readiness to finally step into himself. He took a deep breath, holding his own gaze for a moment longer. This was it. The last night of his childhood, the first night of the rest of his life.

A car horn honked outside, the sound piercing the quiet like an exclamation point. Ian grabbed his wallet and keys from the dresser, checked his reflection one final time, and bounded down the stairs with newfound energy.

As he reached the bottom landing, Gwen appeared in her pajamas, clutching her favorite stuffed unicorn to her chest. "Are you going out tonight?" she asked, a hint of disappointment shadowing her voice.

Ian knelt down to her level, meeting her eyes directly. "Yeah, but I'll see you tomorrow, Gwennie. I'm sorry we didn't get to play Mario Kart today. How about we have a special brother-sister day soon? We can go to the park, and you can show me those new soccer moves you've been practicing."

Gwen's face brightened immediately, her disappointment forgotten. "Really? Can we get ice cream too?"

"Of course," Ian laughed, ruffling her hair affectionately. "It's not a proper park day without ice cream."

Gwen giggled, her small arms wrapping around his neck in a brief, fierce hug before she darted back into the living room, already planning their future adventure aloud to her unicorn.

"Have fun, sweetie!" Imogen's voice carried from the other room, warm with maternal affection. "Be safe!"

As Ian's hand rested on the doorknob, a wave of emotion washed over him—excitement, fear, anticipation, and something deeper that he couldn't quite name. Somehow, he knew with bone-deep certainty that he was leaving this house as one person and would return as another. The enormity of what lay ahead hit him with full force, leaving him momentarily breathless. He was terrified, exhilarated, and utterly unprepared for whatever awaited him. But he knew, with unwavering conviction, that this was a step he had to take.

He pulled open the door, stepping out into the warm summer evening air. The scent of freshly cut grass mingled with the delicate fragrance of his mother's roses, creating a backdrop of sensory memory that he knew would forever be linked to this moment of transition. Shawnee's car idled at the curb, its headlights cutting through the gathering darkness. As he approached, she rolled down the window, her eyes widening dramatically as she took in his transformed appearance.

Shawnee's jaw dropped with theatrical emphasis. "Well, slap my ass silly and call me Sally! Look at you, Mr. GQ! Who are you and what have you done with Ian—I think-sweatpants-are-formal-wear'—Mitchell? You're gonna turn so many heads at Menjo's, we might need a chiropractor on standby!"

She glanced at her watch, an exaggerated motion that matched her personality. "T-minus forty-two minutes to adulthood, birthday boy!" she announced with dramatic flair, drumming her fingers against the steering wheel in an impromptu drum roll. "How does it feel to be in the final countdown of your childhood?"

The question was delivered with Shawnee's usual playful tone, but Ian detected an undercurrent of genuine curiosity beneath the teasing—an acknowledgment that this night marked more than just another trip around the sun. It was a boundary between what had been and what could be, between the person he had pretended to be and the person he truly was.

Ian felt his cheeks flush as he climbed into the passenger seat, the color rising not from embarrassment but from a strange mixture of pride and anticipation. "Shut up," he muttered, but couldn't suppress the smile that tugged at his lips.

As Shawnee pulled away from the curb, Ian felt a cocktail of nervousness and excitement bubbling in his chest, effervescent and impossible to contain. The night stretched before him, full of possibility and potential transformation. He leaned back against the headrest, watching the familiar landscape of his neighborhood recede through the car window.

Little did he know that this evening would change the course of his life forever in ways he couldn't begin to imagine.

Derek's loft felt too quiet when he returned.

The afternoon light slanted through the industrial windows, casting long shadows across the exposed brick and hardwood floors. He dropped his keys on the kitchen counter with a metallic clatter that echoed in the silence, then stood there for a moment, hands braced against the cool granite, trying to steady his breathing.

Get it together, Lawson.

But he couldn't. Not when his skin still remembered the heat of Ian's body pressed against him in that dressing room. Not when his mind kept replaying the way Ian had looked at him in the mirror—those dark eyes wide and wanting, lips parted, breath shallow. The kid had looked at him like Derek was something holy, something worth worshipping, and Derek had felt it in his chest like a physical blow.

He's Gavin's little brother. He's seventeen.

His gaze drifted to the dresser across the room, where he knew his little black book resided in the top drawer—filled with phone numbers from past lovers and potential ones. Any one of them would gladly join him tonight, providing temporary companionship and physical release. But in the wake of the emotional conversation with Gavin that afternoon about his failed relationship with Blake, and last night's awkward morning after with Jeremy, Derek knew such an encounter would bring only fleeting satisfaction followed by deepened emptiness.

He was about to reach for the book of phone numbers despite this knowledge—habit and loneliness are powerful motivators—but something held him back. Instead, his attention shifted to the small wooden trinket box on his bookshelf, the one containing mementos he couldn't bring himself to discard despite his usual unsentimental nature.

Impulsively, he crossed the room and pulled it down, running his fingers over the polished surface before lifting the lid. It contained the detritus of a life lived in fragments—ticket stubs from concerts, a guitar pick from a musician he'd slept with in college, a few photographs he couldn't bear to frame but couldn't throw away.

He opened it almost of its own accord.

Don't.

But he was already lifting the lid, already sifting through the accumulated memories. A backstage pass from a Depeche Mode concert. A note Gavin had written him in high school: You're not broken. You're just Derek. And that's enough. A black-and-white photo booth strip of him and Blake from their first month together, both of them laughing, both of them so fucking young and stupid and hopeful.

And there, at the bottom, catching the light like a tiny sapphire

—
The blue plastic ring.

Derek's breath stopped.

It had been a late August afternoon, one of those last perfect days before school started. They'd been watching Superman 2—again, because Ian never got tired of it—while Gavin snored on the other end of the couch. Derek had been patient, rewinding the good parts over and over, indulging Ian's endless enthusiasm for the Man of Steel.

Then Ian had disappeared upstairs, claiming he needed the bathroom. But when he came back, he'd been trembling, clutching something behind his back. His little face had been so serious, so scared and hopeful all at once.

"Derek?" Ian's voice had been barely a whisper. "I want to marry you one day."

Derek remembered his own shock, the way his face had flushed hot, the stammering attempts to explain why that wasn't possible. But then Ian had pulled out that Ring Pop—blue raspberry, Derek's favorite color, which Ian had somehow known—and held it out with such desperate hope.

"Superman, will you please marry me when I'm done with high school, and then we can tell everyone?"

Derek had known he should say no. Explain more clearly. Let Ian down easy. But the kid had been looking at him like Derek was actually Superman, like Derek could make impossible things possible just by saying yes.

So he had.

"Okay, Lane. I'll marry you when you finish high school."

The memory of Ian's joy was so vivid it hurt—the way he'd launched himself at Derek, small arms wrapping around his neck, the chanted "*thank you, thank you, thank you*" muffled against Derek's shoulder. The Ring Pop had been too big for either of them to wear properly, so they'd shared it. Derek had broken the candy in half, and they'd eaten it together, both ending up with blue-stained teeth and fingers.

A secret promise. Just between them. Until Ian finished high school.

Derek remembered slipping the empty plastic base into his pocket, telling himself he'd throw it away later. Somehow, he never had. It had moved from pocket to drawer to this box, following him through the years like a ghost of that impossible proposal he'd answered.

But now, sitting in his loft with that faded photograph in his hands, Derek felt something crack open in his chest.

When I'm done with high school.

Ian graduated today.

Done with high school.

"Oh god," Derek whispered, the words barely audible in the empty loft.

Beneath the photograph, something small and blue caught the light. Derek brushed aside a ticket stub, his fingers trembling slightly as they closed around it—the tiny plastic ring base, the kind that once held a Ring Pop.

Of course it was still there. He'd kept it all these years, though he'd told himself it was just another trinket from a childhood spent at the Mitchells'. But holding it now, the weight of it felt different—too charged, too alive with memory and promise.

He turned it slowly between his fingers. The scuffed plastic caught the lamplight, flashing that same translucent blue he remembered from Ian's sticky, sugar-stained hands.

He could almost hear the boy's voice again, high and hopeful: *"Superman, will you please marry me when I'm done with high school?"*

He could almost taste blue raspberry.

Derek set the ring down beside both photographs—the five-year-old Ian with his blue-stained smile and the ten-year-old Ian on his shoulders reaching for stars. The three relics side by side formed a timeline he'd never meant to preserve, evidence of a proposal made half in play and half in something deeper neither of them had understood.

Derek stared at the photographs, at the ring base, a sudden realization hitting him like a physical blow, stealing his breath.

That late August afternoon in 1982... five-year-old Ian proposed with a Ring Pop he'd picked out himself, choosing blue raspberry because he knew it was Derek's favorite color.

June 10th, 1987... the day they'd hung the stars, Ian's tenth birthday.

Tomorrow was June 10th, 1995...

Ian's eighteenth birthday.

The birthday *no one* remembered. Not his *parents*. Not his *grandparents*. Not Gavin.

Not Derek.

"Shit," he breathed, setting the photographs down carefully on the coffee table beside the ring. "How did I forget?"

More importantly, how has everyone *else* forgotten?

There had been no mention of it at dinner, no cake preparations, no wrapped presents hidden away. The oversight seemed impossible—the Mitchells celebrated everything, from half-birthdays to good report cards.

The weight of guilt settled in Derek's stomach like a stone. Ian had seemed so quiet at dinner, almost resigned. Had he been waiting for someone to remember? Waiting for his family to acknowledge this milestone birthday?

Waiting for Derek to remember his answer to that childhood proposal?

Derek's hands were shaking now as he picked up the ring pop base again, turning it over and over between his fingers.

"Superman, will you please marry me when I'm done with high school?"

Ian was done with high school now. Graduated today. Standing on the threshold of adulthood, of possibility, of becoming whoever he was meant to be.

And Derek had forgotten.

Worse than that—Derek had spent the entire day noticing Ian in ways that made his skin burn with shame and desire in equal measure. The way he'd looked in that tuxedo at Sacchi's. The flush that had crept up his neck when Derek removed his shirt. Those green eyes darkening with unmistakable want.

The memory of Ian's shy smile at dinner tonight lingered in Derek's mind with stubborn persistence. But it wasn't just the smile—it was everything. The way Ian had looked in that fitted tuxedo earlier today, the fabric emphasizing his slender frame in ways that made Derek's mouth go dry. The flush that had crept up Ian's neck when Derek had removed his shirt at Sacchi's, those green eyes darkening with unmistakable want.

And tonight—God, tonight at dinner when Derek had looked at Ian, really looked at him, and Ian had stared back with such naked longing that Derek had felt it like a physical touch.

The mere recollection sent a wave of heat through Derek's body, pooling low in his stomach. His hands clenched into fists at his sides as he fought against the desire to touch himself, to give in to the arousal that thinking about Ian inevitably sparked.

This was wrong on every conceivable level.

Ian was Gavin's little brother. The kid Derek had known since diapers. The kid who'd once promised to marry him with blue-stained fingers and absolute faith.

But just as quickly as the desire ignited, guilt crashed over him like a bucket of ice water, tightening his chest and making it hard to breathe.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Derek muttered to his reflection in the darkened window, still clutching the ring pop base. *"He was five years old. You were ten. It was a child's fantasy, nothing more."*

But even as he said it, Derek couldn't shake the feeling that something had shifted today. That somewhere between the tuxedo shop and the dinner table, between Derek touching Ian's shoulder and watching him smile across the table, the dynamic between them had fundamentally changed.

And yet.

Now he couldn't stop thinking about the way Ian had felt against him. The sharp intake of breath when Derek's hand touched his waist. The heat of his skin through the thin fabric of his shirt. The way his pulse had been visible in the hollow of his throat, rabbit-fast and desperate.

You want him.

Shut up! Gavin will kill you, if Dr Mitchell doesn't first!

Derek stood abruptly, dropping the ring back into the trinket box and slamming the lid shut like he could contain the memory along with it. This was wrong. This was so fundamentally wrong on every level. Ian was Gavin's brother. Ian was seventeen—eighteen tomorrow, his mind supplied unhelpfully. Ian was innocent and earnest and deserved someone who could give him more than Derek's particular brand of emotional unavailability.

The realization should have terrified him. Instead, it sent another bolt of heat straight through his core.

Derek splashed cold water on his face at the kitchen sink, trying to shock himself back to rationality. But when he looked up, water droplets running down his cheeks, all he could see was Ian's face—those wide green eyes, that soft mouth, the elegant line of his throat.

"He looked at you like you were something to devour," Derek whispered to his reflection. "Like he wanted—"

He cut himself off, unable to finish the thought. Unwilling to acknowledge what he'd seen in Ian's eyes because acknowledging it would mean admitting his own feelings.

Frustrated and dangerously aroused, Derek paced the length of his loft, each step an attempt to outrun thoughts that clung to him like second skin. The conflict within him built with unbearable pressure—desire warring with loyalty, want battling with what was right.

His body knew what it wanted. The evidence of that was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. But his mind—his conscience—kept throwing up barriers.

Gavin's brother.

Just turned eighteen.

Known him since childhood.

The kid who once proposed to you with a Ring Pop.

Off limits in every possible way.

And yet Derek's traitorous body didn't care about any of those very valid reasons. His body was a traitor. Every nerve ending still sang with the ghost of Ian's touch—not just the brief brush in the foyer, but the humid, desperate energy Ian radiated, the way his breath hitched, sounding like a small, wounded bird. It wasn't just desire; it was a gravitational pull that threatened to destabilize his entire world.

He stopped pacing near his bedroom door.

His eyes fell back on the small, unassuming wooden box on his bookshelf—still open, the photographs and ring pop base laid out like evidence of a crime he didn't know he'd committed.

Or a proposal he'd forgotten he'd answered.

He hadn't looked at these things in years, but tonight, they felt like a silent, impossible countdown.

Thirteen years ago, a five-year-old boy had held out a blue Ring Pop with trembling hands and asked Derek to marry him someday.

"Superman, will you please marry me when I'm done with high school, and then we can tell everyone?"

That had been the exact question. Word for word. A five-year-old's proposal, complete with conditions and a timeline.

And Derek had said *yes*.

Worse than forgotten—he'd spent the entire day wanting Ian in ways that made his skin burn with shame and desire in equal measure.

The memory of Ian's transformation today wouldn't leave him alone. The boy he'd known—quiet, shy, perpetually trying to disappear—had somehow become this young man who looked at him with heat and hunger and hope.

When had that happened? When had Little Mitchell stopped being little and become... this?

Derek's hands trembled as he picked up the ring pop base one more time, the plastic warm now from being held. He could still taste blue raspberry if he thought about it hard enough. Could still see five-year-old Ian's face lighting up when Derek had said yes to an impossible promise. Could still feel those small arms wrapped around his neck, the chanted "thank you, thank you, thank you."

"Superman, will you please marry me when I'm done with high school?"

Derek closed his fist around the ring, the edges biting into his palm.

He checked his watch, the dial glowing faintly in the dimly lit room. 11:47 PM. Thirteen minutes until midnight. Thirteen minutes until Ian officially turned eighteen.

Thirteen minutes until Ian was an adult and that childhood proposal technically came due.

What would Ian think if he knew Derek still had this? That Derek had kept the ring base from that proposal for thirteen years, moving it from apartment to apartment, never quite able to throw it away?

The guilt should have been crushing. And it was—but beneath it ran that other current, the one Derek kept trying to deny. The one that whispered Ian isn't a child anymore. The one that remembered the heat

in Ian's eyes tonight, the way he'd leaned into Derek's touch like he was starving for it.

"This is *fucked up*," Derek muttered, putting the ring back down next to the photographs. "This is so *fucked up*."

Loyalty, caution, the five-year age difference, Gavin's inevitable fury, the Mitchell family's disappointment, the way his own family would react—it all amounted to a hollow, empty future where Derek did the "*right*" thing and spent the rest of his life wondering *what if*.

He grabbed his keys, the metal cold and sharp against his palm.

"Fuck it," he said, the sound harsh in the empty loft. "I need to get out of here." He needed to find a pulse, a moment where he wasn't suffocating in his own regret.

He'd go to Menjo's.

Find someone safe, uncomplicated, some air-headed twink, someone who didn't come with the baggage of a lifetime of Sunday dinners and Graham Mitchell's disappointed gaze.

He needed a distraction, a brief, anonymous release, a way to prove he wasn't losing his damn mind over an eighteen-year-old he'd watched grow up.

An eighteen-year-old who'd once proposed to him with a Ring Pop and blue-stained fingers and absolute faith that Derek would say yes.

An eighteen-year-old who looked at him tonight like Derek was still his Superman.

But as he pulled on his black t-shirt—the one that showcased his physique to its best advantage—Derek couldn't escape the small, insistent voice in the back of his mind.

He told himself he was going for anonymity, for control, for distance from this impossible situation. But the small, cruel voice in his mind—the one that sounded suspiciously like Ian's whispered "Superman"—spoke the truth:

He wasn't running from the temptation.

He was driving straight into it.

He was seeking proof that he hadn't imagined the heat, the pull, the catastrophic possibility.

He didn't know the surprise that would be there waiting for him, but deep down, he was hoping the night would give him the truth.

One way or another, tonight would answer the question that had been building since that moment in Sacchi's when their eyes met in the mirror:

Was Ian Mitchell still waiting for his Superman to remember?

Derek grabbed the ring pop base one last time, holding it up to the light. The plastic caught and refracted the glow, turning it into something almost magical—a relic of innocence, a proposal answered in childhood, a dream that maybe, impossibly, hadn't died.

He should put it back in the box. Close the lid. Forget about it
like he had for thirteen years.

Instead, he slipped it into his pocket.

Just in case.

8 - FINALLY

The night air wrapped around Ian like a lover's caress as he stepped from Shawnee's car, humid and electric with possibility. Each breath tasted of freedom—sweet and slightly dangerous, like stolen wine. The distant thump of bass reverberated through the sidewalk beneath his feet, a primal heartbeat calling him forward into the unknown. Neon signs—crimson, sapphire, violet—painted shifting patterns across his friends' faces as they gathered on the curb, their outfits carefully chosen and perfectly coordinated for this milestone evening. The girls radiated confidence, their postures tall and movements fluid with the kind of anticipation that preceded transformation.

Ian, by contrast, felt his body betraying him at every turn. His shoulders curved inward as if trying to protect the vulnerable flutter of his heart. His hands were restless creatures with minds of their own, fingers alternately plucking at the hem of his carefully chosen blue sweater—soft cashmere that Derek had once insisted brought out his eyes—or sliding into his pockets only to emerge seconds later, unsatisfied with their hiding place. The sweater clung to his lean frame in ways that made him hyperaware of his body, of how he might be perceived, of how desperately he wanted to be seen. Really seen. Not as Ian-the-good-student or Ian-the-friend, but as Ian-the-man who desired and could be desired in return.

"Look at that one! And that one!" Renee gasped, her scholarly composure momentarily forgotten as a particularly handsome specimen passed by them.

The city street hummed around them, an organism unto itself, pulsing with secrets and promises. Each storefront exhaled different aromas—garlic and tomato from an Italian restaurant where couples leaned across candlelit tables, sweet cinnamon from a late-night bakery, the sharp tang of brewing coffee that would fuel someone's adventures until dawn. Cigarette smoke curled in lazy tendrils around street corners where groups of people huddled in animated conversation, their laughter sharp and knowing, speaking a language Ian was only beginning to understand. The sidewalk became Renee's personal runway as she twirled beneath each streetlight, her shadow spiraling around her like a partner in some elegant, solitary dance.

"Oh my God, look at that guy's pants!" she whispered-shouted, her volume control nonexistent as she gestured none-too-subtly at a passing clubgoer in leather pants that gleamed under the streetlights like oil slicks. "They're like a disco ball had a baby with a cow!"

"Renee!" Amelia hissed, pushing her wire-rimmed glasses up her nose with an index finger—a gesture so habitual it was practically unconscious. The scholarly disapproval in her voice cracked into a giggle

she couldn't suppress. "Though from a fashion history perspective, they do represent an interesting intersection of post-disco aesthetics and—"

"Girl, save the doctoral thesis for later," Shawnee cut in, rolling her eyes so dramatically her entire head moved with the gesture, her braided hair swinging like a pendulum. "We're here to par-tay!"

Ian felt his nervous tension begin to dissolve in the warm current of their banter, like sugar melting in hot tea. A small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, unbidden but welcome. Trust his friends to transform even this monumental threshold—the very precipice of his new life—into something that felt almost normal, a bridge between his past self and this unknown future stretching before him like an unmapped territory waiting to be explored.

Shawnee shrieked with delight and dramatically pointed with both hands. "Ian, honey, look! We're surrounded by potential! This is going to be legendary! Come on!" She grabbed Ian's arm like a director pulling an actor onto stage and towed him toward the door.

As they approached the entrance to Menjo's, reality reasserted itself with the weight of judgment. The bouncer loomed—a mountain of a man perched on a stool beside the door, making even that sturdy piece of furniture look fragile beneath his bulk. The black leather vest he wore revealed arms mapped with intricate tattoos that told stories Ian longed to read but didn't dare ask about, each line of ink a testimony to a life lived openly. His expression held professional neutrality as he surveyed each approaching patron, a gatekeeper who'd seen everything and been impressed by nothing.

The girls presented their IDs with the casual confidence of those who'd rehearsed the moment in mirrors and late-night practice sessions, earning approving nods from the guardian of this threshold. Ian watched them pass through with the kind of ease he'd never known in his own skin, marveling at how they made belonging look effortless, how they moved through the world without carrying the constant weight of secrecy he'd grown so accustomed to it felt like part of his skeleton.

When Ian's turn came, his fingers fumbled at his wallet, suddenly clumsy as a child's. The plastic photo ID became slippery in his grasp, as if coated in his own nervous perspiration. He extended it toward the bouncer with a hand that betrayed the slightest tremor, a seismic reading of his internal earthquake. His heart hammered against his ribs—a prisoner demanding release, screaming that he belonged here, that he had a right to this space, even if the date on his ID said otherwise.

The bouncer scrutinized the card with the intensity of a scholar examining ancient text. His gaze moved between the photo—Ian at sixteen, softer-faced and more innocent, before he'd learned what it meant to want—and Ian's face now, sharpened by anticipation and a

hunger he was only beginning to acknowledge. Seconds stretched into what felt like geological epochs as Ian held his breath, his lungs burning with the effort of appearing calm, of not showing how desperately this moment mattered. Finally, with a minute shake of his head that felt seismic, the bouncer held the ID back.

"Sorry, cutie." The endearment should have soothed, but it stung instead, patronizing rather than affirming. "This club is for eighteen and over only."

The word 'cutie' echoed in Ian's mind. Was it condescending? Flirtatious? Just protocol? He couldn't tell, and that uncertainty gnawed at him like a persistent ache. His throat tightened, disappointment coating his tongue with the metallic taste of failure.

Shawnee stepped forward before Ian could even process the rejection, before the hot sting of tears could form behind his eyes and humiliate him further. Her arm snaked around his shoulders and pulled him against her side with protective ferocity, and he could smell her perfume—something floral and fierce, jasmine with teeth.

"My good sir!" she proclaimed with theatrical gravity worthy of a courtroom drama, channeling every ounce of her formidable presence into this moment. "This is my very best friend in the whole wide world, Ian."

Ian managed a weak smile, sweat beading at his temples like prayer beads counting down his anxiety. His heart hammered against his ribs so hard he wondered if the bouncer could see it, could read his desperation in the pulse at his throat. "Hi," he offered lamely, the word falling between them like a pebble into a very deep well, its splash barely audible over the muted thump of music from inside—music that might remain forever out of reach.

The bouncer remained unimpressed, his expression as immovable as continental plates. "Hi," he replied, his flatness turning the simple word into a wall, brick and mortar made of syllables. "He's only seventeen. Eighteen and over only." Each syllable landed with the finality of a judge's gavel, sealing Ian's fate before he'd even had a chance to argue his case.

Shawnee, undeterred—because she was never deterred, bless her beautiful, stubborn soul—leaned forward slightly. Her eyes widened with the earnestness of a born performer who knew exactly which emotional strings to pluck, which notes would resonate with her audience. "Yes, we're well aware of that. But, Ian here, will be exactly eighteen years old at exactly the stroke of midnight...which is in..." She looked to Renee, passing an invisible baton in their well-rehearsed routine, a choreography of friendship they'd perfected over years of having each other's backs.

Renee immediately checked her watch, the rhinestones on its band catching the neon light and throwing tiny rainbows across her

dark skin like blessings. She twisted her wrist with flourish, a magician revealing the final trick, the one that would make everything impossible suddenly possible. "In exactly fourteen minutes and twenty-two seconds!"

"Fourteen minutes and twenty-two seconds!" Shawnee echoed triumphantly, as if they'd just solved a complex mathematical equation that would unlock the universe's secrets, as if time itself could be negotiated when friendship was the currency.

Ian nodded, trying to project a confidence he didn't feel, his weight shifting from one foot to the other in a nervous dance as old as uncertainty itself. "Yeah, I turn eighteen in fourteen minutes and twenty-two seconds." The declaration sounded absurd even to his own ears, desperate and childish, like claiming to be "almost five and three-quarters" when you're four and a half. He felt his cheeks burn with embarrassment, heat crawling up his neck like vines, but he held the bouncer's gaze, refusing to look away. If he was going to be denied, he'd at least be denied while looking this man in the eye, while claiming his dignity even if he couldn't claim entry.

Amelia, sensing the precariousness of their position with her usual analytical precision, stepped forward. Her voice took on the reasonable tone of a mediator, the same one she used when Shawnee and Renee argued over borrowing clothes or when she had to explain to professors why her unconventional papers were actually brilliant. "Can't you make an exception just this once? It would mean so much to him. It's only fourteen minutes and twenty-two seconds..."

There was something in her voice—not just logic but genuine emotion, a rawness that made Ian's throat tighten. She was laying bare his vulnerability to this stranger, exposing his need, and somehow it felt both terrifying and liberating, like standing naked in daylight and discovering the sun was kind.

The bouncer's stern facade began to crack almost imperceptibly—the slightest softening around his eyes, a barely discernible relaxation in his jaw, as if he were remembering something distant and bittersweet. He studied Ian's ID once more, his thumb tracing the edge of the card as if feeling for authenticity in more than just the plastic, searching for something deeper. Then he looked at the group of friends, all wearing expressions ranging from Shawnee's determined grin to Amelia's calculated reasonableness to Renee's wide-eyed pleading.

His gaze lingered on Ian, and something passed between them—recognition, perhaps, or memory. The understanding that every person who passed through these doors carried their own story of arrival, their own moment of crossing over from one version of themselves to another. The bouncer's eyes held knowledge Ian didn't

yet possess but would, soon enough: the price of admission to this world wasn't just turning eighteen. It was courage.

With a sigh that seemed to originate from his very core, carrying the weight of countless nights spent as guardian of this threshold, watching transformation after transformation, he finally relented. "Fine." He handed the ID back, his massive fingers surprisingly gentle, almost reverent in their care. "But if anyone asks, I didn't see a thing..."

The girls erupted in excited cheers that startled a passing couple, jumping up and down with enough collective energy to power a small city, their joy uncontained and contagious. Ian felt a wave of relief wash through him so powerful it nearly buckled his knees, made his vision blur at the edges with tears he refused to shed. This was it. This was actually happening. He was going inside. He was going to see what lay beyond this door, beyond the life he'd known.

"Thank you," he managed, the words inadequate vessels for the gratitude flooding his system, drowning every anxiety in a rush of pure, crystalline joy. His voice cracked slightly, emotion overtaking composure. "Really, thank you so much."

The bouncer's stern expression melted into something gentler, years dropping away to reveal a glimpse of someone who perhaps remembered his own first night crossing such a threshold, his own moment of becoming, when he'd stood where Ian now stood and wondered if he'd be brave enough to step through. "Happy Birthday, cutie." This time, the endearment felt like a blessing, an anointing. "Have a night to remember."

He stepped aside, opening the path to a world Ian had only imagined in the privacy of his bedroom, behind closed doors and drawn curtains, in fantasies he'd barely admitted to himself even in the silent hours before dawn. The heavy bass that had been a distant pulse now enveloped them as the door swung open, beckoning them inward with invisible hands, welcoming them home.

"Guys, do you see how amazing this place is?" Renee's enthusiasm bubbled over as they stepped inside, crossing the threshold from one world into another. Her hands clasped beneath her chin like a child receiving an unexpected gift, a miracle made manifest in neon and bass and possibility. "The lights, the music, the people—it's like we've stepped into a whole new world of possibilities!"

Ian's senses were immediately overwhelmed by the kaleidoscopic assault. The space sprawled before them—a labyrinth of levels and alcoves bathed in ever-shifting light that painted everyone in shades of possibility, that suggested transformation was as simple as stepping into a different color. Madonna's "Vogue" commanded the airwaves, her voice floating above the mass of bodies that undulated like

a single organism beneath swirling spotlights, each person a cell in a larger, beautiful body moving in synchronized ecstasy.

Every corner revealed a different tableau, a different facet of this diamond world: drag queens backstage applying final touches to glittering makeup, their faces works of art in progress, studies in transformation and defiance; friends crowded into velvet booths sharing cocktails in impossible colors—electric blue, radioactive green, sunset orange—that seemed to glow from within; couples of all configurations swaying together without a trace of self-consciousness, their bodies speaking a language Ian was only beginning to learn, a grammar of touch and trust and freedom.

And the men. God, the men. Everywhere Ian looked, there were men dancing together, touching freely, kissing without fear or shame or the constant vigilance that had defined Ian's entire life. Some wore tight shirts that showcased sculpted bodies, others dressed in styles that defied easy categorization—gender as performance, as art, as freedom rather than prison. Ian's eyes drank it all in greedily, years of enforced starvation making him ravenous for these images, these possibilities, this proof that he wasn't alone, wasn't wrong, wasn't the only one who felt what he felt.

"Oh my God..." Ian breathed, his eyes wide as they struggled to absorb every detail at once, to memorize this moment for all the days to come, to burn it into his memory so deeply that no amount of doubt could ever erase it. The words emerged as much exhale as speech, prayer and profanity merged into something sacred. "This is..."

"Home," Amelia finished for him, squeezing his arm with surprising strength, anchoring him to this moment, to this reality. Her usual analytical gaze had softened with understanding, with the kind of love that saw you completely—every fear, every hope, every secret shame—and accepted you anyway, loved you harder because of it rather than despite it. "Right?!" Her eyes swept the room in methodical appreciation, cataloging and analyzing even as she felt, her brain and heart working in perfect harmony. "The energy here is fascinating. Notice how the lighting and music are designed to create a specific atmosphere. And look at the diversity of the crowd—it's a microcosm of the LGBTQ+ community."

Ian nodded mutely, unable to articulate the emotion swelling in his chest—too big for words, too profound for simple expression, too important to reduce to mere language. Home. Yes. A home he'd never known existed, a belonging he'd never dared to claim. His eyes stung with unexpected tears, and he blinked them back furiously, not wanting to miss a single second of this moment, not wanting to blur this vision with salt water when he needed to see it all, absorb it all, become part of it all.

The pulsing lights and relentless rhythm pulled at something deep within Ian's memory, dragging it to the surface like a pearl dredged from dark water. Suddenly, he was thirteen again, watching from the kitchen window as Derek emerged from the Mitchell family pool at a summer barbecue, water cascading down his toned chest in rivulets that caught the afternoon sun like liquid diamonds. He remembered the peculiar tightness in his throat, the inexplicable need to look away coupled with the absolute inability to do so—as if his eyes had developed a will independent of his brain.

That was the moment he had known, with devastating clarity, that he was different from his friends. The way his heart had raced, the heat that had flooded his cheeks—it wasn't the innocent admiration he'd pretended it was, wasn't the casual appreciation of athletic prowess he'd told himself made sense. It was pure, unmitigated attraction, as undeniable as gravity, as inevitable as sunrise. And just as terrifying.

They navigated through the sea of bodies, the press of strangers simultaneously intimidating and thrilling. Each brush of a shoulder, each accidental touch, reminded Ian that he was here, he was real, he was finally in this space he'd only dreamed about. Shawnee led the charge, creating a path through the crowd with the determination of an icebreaker ship cutting through arctic ice, until they secured a table near the bar. She whistled appreciatively as a statuesque woman in a red sequined gown that caught and fractured light with every movement sashayed past, each step a masterclass in confidence. The woman responded with a flirtatious wink that made Shawnee clutch her chest dramatically.

"Holy sequins, Batman!" Shawnee clutched at her chest, eyes tracking the woman's path through the crowd like a heat-seeking missile. "I need her legs, her confidence, and her entire wardrobe. Do you think she'd notice if I just... became her? Like, 'Single White Female' but with more glitter?"

"Honey, don't we all need that?" a warm, masculine voice answered from behind them, rich with amusement and understanding.

The group turned to find the speaker: a smiling man in his forties, lean and handsome with salt-and-pepper temples that contrasted beautifully with his youthful energy and unlined face. He wore a tight yellow tank top that showcased well-maintained arms—the kind that came from consistent effort rather than vanity—and jeans that had clearly been chosen with careful consideration. A Bud Light occupied each hand, the bottles sweating in the club's heat, condensation dripping down the glass like tears of joy.

"First time here?" he asked, directing his question to Ian with a knowing wink that suggested he'd asked the same question to countless

wide-eyed newcomers before, had perhaps been that newcomer himself once.

Ian felt heat rise in his face, the blush undoubtedly visible even in the club's dim lighting. His cheeks burned with the telltale warmth of being seen, of being read so easily. "Is it that obvious?"

The man laughed, a rich, warm sound like brandy poured over ice, smooth and intoxicating. "Only because I remember my first time like it was yesterday. The way your eyes are trying to look everywhere at once? Dead giveaway." He shifted his beers to one hand with practiced ease, extending the other. "I'm Marcus."

Renee, incapable of allowing any social vacuum to exist for more than two seconds, bounced forward with the enthusiasm of a puppy meeting new friends. "Hi, Marcus! I'm Renee! This is Amelia, Shawnee, and Ian!" She glanced at her watch again, her excitement ratcheting upward with each passing second. "Ian is about to turn eighteen in nine minutes and seven seconds!"

Marcus's face lit up with genuine delight, his eyebrows arching expressively, his whole body seeming to brighten with the news. "You're kidding?! Well, oh my beating heart! That is so exciting!" His free hand pressed to his chest as if to calm the organ in question.

As if summoned by some invisible signal—the kind that comes from years of being attuned to another person's presence—a handsome man in a sleeveless black t-shirt and extremely tight white shorts that left very little to the imagination approached. He slid an arm around Marcus's waist with practiced ease, the movement so fluid it was clearly the result of countless repetitions, a dance they'd perfected over years. He plucked one of the beers from Marcus's hand in the same fluid motion, the choreography of long partnership. Marcus turned to plant a kiss on the newcomer's cheek, the gesture carrying the comfortable affection of people who'd seen each other at their worst and stayed anyway.

"Babe," Marcus said, gesturing to the group with his now-free hand, "this is Shawnee, Amelia, Renee, and Ian! This is my boyfriend, Perry." Perry smiled warmly at the group, his whole face transforming with the expression, as Marcus continued, his voice rising with crescendoing excitement. "Perry, it's Ian's first time here, and he's going to turn eighteen in just a couple of minutes!"

Perry's eyes widened, a grin spreading across his face with infectious enthusiasm that seemed to radiate outward like ripples in water. He threw his head back and let out a joyous "whoop," causing heads to turn in their direction, drawing eyes and smiles from across the nearby tables. "We've got a birthday boy over here!" he shouted, raising his beer toward Ian like a torch, like a beacon. "HAPPY BIRTHDAY, IAN!"

The enthusiasm was contagious, spreading like wildfire through dry grass. People from nearby tables lifted their drinks in

impromptu toast, strangers celebrating a stranger simply because joy demanded to be shared. Shouts of "HAPPY BIRTHDAY" rippled outward like waves from a stone dropped in still water, accompanied by whoops and cheers that built upon each other until the noise was almost deafening.

Ian felt his face burning, a peculiar mixture of embarrassment and pleasure coursing through him like competing drugs in his bloodstream. His entire life had been spent trying to avoid attention, to blend seamlessly into any background, to be invisible, unremarkable, safe. And now he was the center of a celebration among strangers, his existence acknowledged and celebrated by people who owed him nothing, who chose to honor him simply because he existed. "Thank you!" he managed to stammer out, his voice cracking slightly with emotion, before turning to his friends with bewildered joy painting his features. "I can't believe this is happening!"

Renee immediately engaged the couple in conversation, her natural exuberance finding kindred spirits in Marcus and Perry like recognizing like. "Your outfits are fabulous! You must tell us where you shop. Oh, and how long have you been together? I bet you have the most romantic story!"

"If you don't mind," Amelia added, her curiosity temporarily overriding her usual social restraint, her academic mind already cataloging and analyzing, "could you share your perspective on how the gay scene has evolved? Your experiences could provide valuable insight for Ian as he begins his journey."

The music pulsed through the club like a collective heartbeat, its rhythm seeping into Ian's bones and awakening something long dormant—something primal and honest and unafraid. Marcus and Perry exchanged a look of such deep understanding that Ian felt like an intruder simply witnessing it, a private language spoken in glances and microexpressions, then turned back to the group with wide smiles that suggested they'd been exactly where Ian stood now, that they remembered.

"You picked a great night to join us, Ian," Marcus said, his voice carrying the warmth of genuine welcome, the kind that came from knowing what it meant to need welcoming. "Menjo's always throws the best Friday night parties."

Amelia nodded enthusiastically, surprisingly at ease in this environment that seemed so contrary to her usual academic haunts, her wire-rimmed glasses reflecting the club's shifting lights. "We wanted to make sure Ian's first time here was unforgettable."

"And trust me, honey," Perry added with a theatrical gesture that encompassed the entire club, his arms spreading wide, "if anyone knows about making an entrance, it's us. Our first date? This one here," he nudged Marcus with his elbow, affection and mischief dancing in his

eyes, "tried to impress me by doing a dramatic spin into the bar. Ended up taking out three bar stools and a very surprised drag queen."

Marcus groaned, the sound exaggerated for comic effect, playing his role in this well-worn story. "Ten years together and he still won't let me live that down."

"The queen's wig landed in someone's martini!" Perry exclaimed, his hands painting the scene in midair, recreating the chaos with vivid gestures. "It was like watching a very gay disaster movie in slow motion. There was glitter everywhere for weeks. I'm pretty sure I'm still finding it in places I'd rather not mention."

Ian laughed, the sound bursting from him unexpectedly, tension melting from his shoulders like ice in sunlight. There was something profoundly comforting about seeing such a solid couple still teasing each other about their beginnings, still finding joy in shared history, still choosing each other day after day after day. It gave him hope—a fragile, precious thing—that love could be both passionate and lasting, that the fireworks didn't have to fade into ashes.

"Well, you certainly came to the right place for a birthday!" Perry raised his beer again, his eyes crinkling at the corners with genuine warmth. "Here's to your eighteenth! And to many more wild nights to come!" He took a hearty sip, as if to seal the toast with liquid ceremony, with an offering to whatever gods watched over gay boys finding their way home.

Marcus leaned in, his voice dropping conspiratorially as the music shifted to a new track, the bass line thrumming through the floor and up through their feet. "You know, I remember my first time here. I was shaking like a leaf, convinced everyone could tell I didn't belong. But then this gorgeous drag queen took me under her wing, bought me a drink, and told me I was home." His eyes grew distant with memory, soft with nostalgia.

Perry nodded, his arm tightening around Marcus's waist in silent solidarity, in the kind of support that didn't require words. "It's a rite of passage, really. Everyone remembers their first night at Menjo's. It's like... it's like being born, but this time you get to choose who you become."

Ian felt a lump form in his throat, emotion threatening to spill over in the most embarrassing way possible. He blinked rapidly, refusing to cry, refusing to let tears blur this perfect moment. He was overwhelmed by the warmth and acceptance radiating from this couple, from the entire space around them. They embodied everything he hoped to find in this new world he was stepping into—love, confidence, and an unapologetic embrace of identity. In that moment, he could almost see a future version of himself reflected in them, one where he moved through the world without the constant weight of pretense, without the exhausting performance of being someone he wasn't.

"Thank you," Ian said softly, emotion making his voice slightly hoarse, rough around the edges. "For the welcome, for the toast... for everything." The words felt inadequate, too small to contain the gratitude flooding through him.

Marcus reached out, squeezing Ian's shoulder with gentle understanding, his grip firm and reassuring. "We've all been where you are, kid. Just remember—you belong here. This is your family now, too." His eyes held a knowing that came from experience, from having walked this same path years ago. "The gay community is a family. And as of tonight, you're part of it."

The energy in Menjo's crescendoed as midnight approached, a palpable buzz of anticipation that seemed to charge the very air, to make it shimmer and spark. Ian found himself at the center of an ever-growing circle of well-wishers, strangers who'd heard it was his birthday and wanted to participate in his becoming. His friends flanked him protectively—Shawnee on his right, her arm linked through his, solid and sure; Renee on his left, bouncing slightly on the balls of her feet, unable to contain her excitement; Amelia completing their protective triangle, her usual reserve melting in the warmth of collective celebration. Marcus and Perry positioned themselves directly before Ian, self-appointed masters of ceremonies for this impromptu birthday ritual, this threshold crossing.

"Alright, folks!" Marcus called out, his voice carrying over Madonna's final notes with the projection of someone accustomed to making himself heard. "We've got about two minutes until our boy Ian here officially becomes a man!"

A cheer rose from the surrounding crowd, the sound washing over Ian in a wave that left him lightheaded with disbelief, with the intoxicating reality that this was happening, this was real. The music seemed to dim slightly, as if the DJ had sensed the moment's significance, had recognized that sometimes the real music happened in the spaces between tracks, in the collective breath of a community witnessing one of their own step into himself.

Perry produced a handful of party hats from seemingly nowhere—possibly his pocket, possibly magic—distributing them with the flourish of a magician revealing his final trick. "Can't have a birthday without these!" he declared, carefully placing one atop Ian's head, the elastic string snapping gently under his chin. The simple cardboard cone felt absurd and perfect, childish and sacred all at once.

Marcus withdrew a cupcake from behind the bar where he must have stashed it earlier, a small chocolate confection with a single candle waiting to be lit. The flame flickered to life under Perry's lighter, a tiny beacon in the club's darkness.

As the flame danced and swayed, Amelia squeezed Ian's hand, her touch grounding him to this moment, to this reality. "Make a wish,"

she whispered, her usual analytical gaze softened with an affection that made Ian's chest ache.

Ian closed his eyes, his mind racing through the possibilities. What did he truly wish for in this moment of transformation? Freedom? Acceptance? Love? To never feel shame again? To kiss Derek Lawson? Standing in this place, surrounded by new and old friends alike, all desires seemed suddenly possible, tangible in a way they'd never been within the confines of his carefully constructed life, his meticulously maintained closet.

"One minute!" Shawnee called out, her eyes fixed on her watch with the intensity of someone tracking a rocket launch, tracking each second with precision.

The music seemed to recede further, the background hum of conversation fading as everyone's attention centered on the impending moment like a collective held breath. Ian's heart pounded against his ribs, each beat a timestamp marking the final moments of his childhood, of his before-life.

"Thirty seconds!" Marcus announced, his arm draped around Perry's shoulders, both watching Ian with the fond nostalgia of those remembering their own such moments, their own crossings-over.

Ian looked around at the circle of faces illuminated by the candle's glow—his best friends who had known and accepted him for years, and these new friends who had welcomed him so warmly into their world with no questions asked, no proof demanded. Gratitude welled within him, threatening to overflow in a most embarrassing fashion. He blinked rapidly, holding it together through sheer force of will.

"Ten!" The countdown began in earnest, voices joining in rising excitement, building like a wave.

"Nine!" Ian drew a deep breath, steadying himself against the tide of emotion threatening to sweep him away.

"Eight!" Shawnee's grip on his hand tightened, a physical anchor to this reality, to this moment that was somehow both dream and truth.

"Seven!" Renee bounced higher, her enthusiasm hitting new heights, her joy infectious and pure.

"Six!" Amelia pressed a quick, unexpected kiss to Ian's cheek, the gesture startling from his most reserved friend, precious beyond measure.

"Five!" Marcus and Perry shared a look of knowing affection, their smiles reflecting not just this moment but the accumulation of countless such moments, decades of memories.

"Four!" The crowd around them swelled, more voices joining the count, strangers becoming witnesses, becoming part of his story.

"Three!" Ian's pulse quickened, matching the rhythm of the countdown, his entire body thrumming with anticipation.

"Two!" He closed his eyes, bracing for the transition, for the person he was about to become.

"One!" A collective intake of breath, the whole room poised on the edge of the moment, on the knife's edge between past and future.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY, IAN!"

The cheer that erupted was deafening, a wall of sound that seemed to physically impact Ian's body, to reverberate through his bones. He opened his eyes to a shower of confetti, the iridescent pieces catching the overhead lights as they drifted downward like technicolor snow, like blessings falling from heaven. Before he could process the sight, before he could even breathe, he was engulfed in a group hug, his friends pressing in from all sides with fierce affection, with love so tangible he could taste it.

"Make a wish!" Renee urged, holding up the cupcake, the candle's flame dancing precariously as she navigated the group hug, refusing to let logistics diminish the moment.

Ian leaned forward, focusing all his hopes for this new chapter into a single moment, his eyes closing once more. He thought of Derek, of freedom, of never having to hide again. With a deep breath that filled his lungs completely—oxygen and hope and possibility—he blew out the candle, and another cheer rose from the crowd, louder than before.

As he straightened, flushed with emotion and the press of bodies, with the heat of being loved, Marcus pressed a shot glass into his hand. The glass was cool against his palm, the liquid inside amber under the club lights, promising fire and courage. "You aren't legal for this yet, but fuck it," Marcus said with a conspiratorial wink, with the kind of benevolent rule-breaking that felt like initiation. "May it be the start of many happy nights here with us."

Ian raised the glass, looking around at the smiling faces of his friends, both old and new. The moment felt suspended in amber, a memory being created even as he lived it, something he knew he'd return to again and again in the years to come. "Thank you," he said, his voice thick with emotion, rough with gratitude. "All of you. This is... more than I ever could have imagined."

"To Ian!" Perry called out, raising his own glass high. "May your eighteenth year be filled with joy, love, and fabulousness!"

"To Ian!" the group echoed, and Ian threw back the shot, the tequila burning a fiery path down his throat that seemed to ignite something within him—a spark of courage, of possibility, of futures yet unwritten. The liquor's warmth spread through him like wildfire, like transformation made liquid.

The liquor's warmth spread through him, heightening the surreality of the moment as Deee-Lite's "*Groove Is In The Heart*" took

over the sound system, its bassline vibrating through the floor beneath their feet, pulsing up through their bodies like a second heartbeat.

*"The chills that you spill up my back keep me filled
With satisfaction when we're done
Satisfaction of what's to come
I couldn't ask for another"*

Shawnee looked at Ian, her eyebrows raised in challenge as she nodded toward the dance floor, toward the writhing mass of bodies moving in ecstatic abandon. "Let's go!"

Ian hesitated, his old insecurities rising to the surface like oil on water, impossible to ignore. Dancing had always been a particular form of torture in school gym classes—all gangly limbs and misplaced feet, a guaranteed path to humiliation and mockery.

Amelia placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder, reading his hesitation with her usual perceptiveness, her ability to see through him like glass. "Remember, statistically speaking, most people are too focused on themselves to pay much attention to others. Plus, dancing releases endorphins which could help calm your nerves. Why don't you just start with some simple steps?" Her advice, delivered with clinical precision, somehow managed to be exactly what he needed—logic as comfort, science as permission.

Renee grabbed Ian's hand, her energy impossible to resist, a force of nature in human form. "Come on, birthday boy! This song is a bop and you look too good to be standing on the sidelines. Let's show this club how Grosse Pointe does it!"

Before he could formulate any further objections, before his anxiety could construct more walls, Ian found himself pulled onto the dance floor, the press of bodies both intimidating and oddly liberating. The anonymity of the crowd provided a strange sort of freedom—who here would remember or care if he moved awkwardly? They were all too busy living their own lives, dancing their own dances.

*"The depth of hula groove
Moves into the tenth hoop
We're gonna groove to Horton Hears a Who-who
I couldn't ask for another
No, I couldn't ask for another"*

Tentatively at first, he began to move, letting the music guide him, trusting the rhythm to tell his body what to do. His friends created a protective circle around him, their own uninhibited movements encouraging his, giving him permission to let go. The song's infectious rhythm worked its way into his system, overriding self-consciousness with pure sensation, with the simple animal joy of movement.

Any lingering embarrassment melted away as he surrendered to the moment, swept up in the collective energy that flowed through the dance floor like electricity through water. For once, he wasn't worrying about who might see or what they might think. He was simply... free. Present. Alive in a way he'd never been before.

"Groove is in the heart"

It was in this moment of transcendent belonging, this perfect suspension between past and future, that Ian, spinning under the fractured light of the disco ball, collided with a solid chest. Strong hands steadied him, preventing an embarrassing fall, gripping his shoulders with a warmth that seeped through his sweater. An apology formed on his lips as he looked up, only to die there—the words evaporating like morning dew—as he registered exactly who he'd crashed into.

"Groove is in the heart"

In an instant, the universe seemed to realign itself as Ian's green eyes locked with a pair of striking blue ones he knew better than his own reflection, knew from a thousand stolen glances and forbidden dreams. Time appeared to suspend itself, the club's noise receding to a distant hum as reality restructured around this impossible coincidence, this collision that felt more like destiny.

"Groove is in the heart"

Derek Lawson stood before him, and Ian forgot how to breathe. The black t-shirt Derek wore hugged his torso so perfectly it bordered on obscene, the fabric clinging to every line of muscle Ian had memorized from years of covert observation. Surprise etched itself across his handsome features, his lips parting slightly in shock, his hands still gripping Ian's shoulders as if he couldn't quite believe what—who—he was touching.

"Ian? What are you—" He broke off, his eyes traveling down to take in the party hat still perched on Ian's head and the confetti clinging to his clothes like celebration made tangible. Understanding dawned in his eyes, followed immediately by a flash of shame that made his face fall, made him look suddenly younger. "It's your birthday. Of course. Oh my God, Ian... I'm so sorry. I realized as soon as I got home, and was going to call tomorrow..."

Without hesitation, before Ian could process what was happening, Derek pulled him into a warm embrace that seemed to redefine the concept of touch. Ian's face pressed against Derek's chest, and he could feel the steady thrum of his heartbeat, could smell his

cologne—something woody and clean that made Ian's head spin. "Happy Birthday," Derek murmured, his breath warm against Ian's ear, sending shivers cascading down his spine like dominoes falling.

The air between them transformed instantly, charged with a current Ian had only ever imagined in late-night fantasies, in the privacy of his locked bedroom. The thudding bass receded to background noise as they stared at each other, the crowd seeming to part around them like they existed in their own bubble of altered time, their own private universe. Ian was hyper-aware of every point of contact between their bodies, of the warmth radiating from Derek's skin like a furnace, of how Derek's eyes never left his face even as dancers jostled around them, even as the world continued spinning.

"Do you..." Derek's voice emerged husky, rougher than usual, the words clearly considered before being released. He leaned closer, and Ian could feel the heat of him, could count his eyelashes if he wanted. His breath was warm against Ian's ear, necessary to be heard over the music but feeling intimate in ways that made Ian's knees weak. "Do you want to dance? With me?"

Ian nodded, not trusting his voice to remain steady if he attempted speech, not trusting himself to form coherent words when his entire vocabulary had reduced itself to 'Derek' and 'yes' and 'please'. Derek's hands slid from his shoulders down to his waist with devastating slowness, and Ian's own arms wound around Derek's neck in a motion that felt both foreign and instinctual, as if his body had been rehearsing for this moment while his conscious mind remained oblivious, practicing in dreams and daydreams for years.

They began to sway together, the frantic energy of Deee-Lite shifting seamlessly into Ce Ce Peniston's "Finally," and Ian nearly laughed at the cosmic timing, at the universe's sense of humor. Its lyrics suddenly, achingly relevant to Ian's situation, to this moment that felt both inevitable and impossible.

"Meeting Mr. Right, the man of my dreams / The one who shows me true love, or at least it seems / With brown cocoa skin, and curly black hair / It's just the way he looks at me, that gentle loving stare..."

Derek guided Ian through the crowd with the confidence of long familiarity, his movements fluid and assured, his hands on Ian's waist both gentle and certain, simultaneously supportive and possessive. He marveled at how different this felt from countless nights spent in this very club, with its parade of faceless men who'd never held his interest beyond the physical, beyond the moment. None of them had ever looked at him the way Ian was looking at him now—with a mixture of wonder and desire so pure it almost hurt to witness, so honest it made Derek's chest ache.

Derek's hands found Ian's hips with devastating certainty, fingers spreading across the narrow span of them, thumbs pressing into the hollows there, and Ian felt his brain short-circuit completely. Every synapse fired at once and then went dark, leaving only sensation. Panic threatened to override pleasure as he frantically tried to remember anything useful from years of forced school dances. 'Okay, Mitchell,' he thought frantically, his internal monologue spiraling, 'just remember what they taught you in gym class. Left foot, right foot... wait, was that the Macarena? Oh God, why am I thinking about the Macarena?!'

As if sensing his internal spiral—and how could he not, when Ian's body had gone rigid with panic—Derek leaned close, his lips brushing the shell of Ian's ear, breath warm and intimate. "Relax," he murmured, the word itself a gentle command, a permission. "Just feel the music. Though if you want to break out the Macarena, I won't judge."

Ian's startled laugh bubbled up between them, genuine and unguarded, breaking the tension like a pin to a balloon. "You can read minds now?"

"Only yours," Derek replied with a wink that sent liquid heat through Ian's veins, that made his stomach flip and his pulse race. "And right now you're thinking way too much. There's no wrong way to do this."

Everything else receded from Ian's awareness—his friends watching with varying expressions of shock and delight from the edge of the dance floor, Shawnee's mouth hanging open, Renee bouncing with excitement; the curious glances from other patrons who clearly recognized Derek, who were probably wondering who this boy was; the questions and complications that would inevitably arise in the harsh light of day, in the real world outside this bubble. Here, now, there was only this: Derek's forehead coming to rest against his, their breath mingling in the narrow space between them, the infinitesimal distance between their lips begging to be crossed, demanding to be eliminated.

"Finally, it has happened to me, right in front of my face, and I just can't describe it..."

"Ian," Derek murmured, his voice carrying a reverence that made Ian's name sound like something precious, like something worth savoring. "Can... Can I—?"

Ian's breath caught in his throat, his heart hammering so hard he was certain Derek could feel it against his chest. In daydreams and midnight fantasies, he'd always imagined himself confident and smooth in this moment, the practiced seducer who knew what to say, how to move. Reality found him trembling slightly, overwhelmed by a cocktail of desire, nervous anticipation, and lingering disbelief that this was

happening, that this was real. But as Derek's eyes searched his, full of warmth and unmistakable longing and something deeper he didn't dare name, Ian found a courage within himself that he hadn't known existed.

He closed that final sliver of space between them, pressing his lips to Derek's in answer to the unfinished question.

*"Finally you've come along
The way I feel about you it just can't be wrong
If you only knew the way I feel about you
I just can't describe it"*

As their lips met, time seemed to crystallize around them, the world solidifying into this single point of contact. Ian's heart hammered against his ribs, the thundering beat almost drowning out the music that surrounded them, almost drowning out thought itself. Derek's lips were softer than Ian had imagined during countless forbidden fantasies, during late nights alone in his bed, moving against his with a tenderness that made his knees threaten to buckle, made him grateful for Derek's hands anchoring him in place. The warmth of Derek's body pressed against his sent currents of electricity cascading down his spine, lighting up nerve pathways he hadn't known existed.

Ian's mind reeled with the reality of the moment. He'd dreamed of this for so long that the actual sensation was almost too intense to process, almost overwhelming in its perfection. Derek tasted of mint and the slight bitterness of beer, a combination that imprinted itself in Ian's memory as the taste of transformation, the flavor of becoming. As Derek's tongue gently sought entrance, asking permission with the lightest pressure, Ian gasped softly, opening to him without hesitation, without thought, only want.

Their tongues met, and a jolt of pure sensation coursed through Ian's body, awakening nerve endings he hadn't known existed, setting every cell on fire. His hands, which had been frozen in uncertainty, found their way to Derek's chest almost of their own volition. Through the thin fabric of the t-shirt, he could feel the solid muscle beneath, the rapid beating of a heart that matched his own frantic rhythm—proof that Derek was affected too, that this wasn't one-sided, that Ian's desire was met and matched and returned.

When they finally broke apart, both breathless and flushed, Ian's eyes fluttered open to meet Derek's intense gaze. The blue of Derek's eyes had darkened to the shade of twilight ocean, pupils dilated with desire so his irises were mere rings of color. In that moment, all Ian's doubts and fears seemed to dissolve like morning mist under sunlight. This was right. This was where he belonged. In Derek's arms, in this moment, in this perfect collision of want and reality.

"Wow," Ian breathed, a smile spreading across his face with unstoppable momentum, joy bubbling up from somewhere deep in his chest.

Derek's answering grin was radiant, transforming his handsome features with boyish delight, making him look younger, happier, unguarded. "Wow indeed," he murmured, leaning in for another brief, sweet kiss that tasted like promises.

Ian felt giddy and overwhelmed, a thousand sensations competing for his attention, each one demanding to be felt fully. His lips tingled pleasantly, his body hummed with new awareness, and his heart felt so full it threatened to burst through his chest, to overflow with everything he was feeling.

This wasn't just a kiss—it was a beginning, a revelation, a threshold crossed that he could never uncross, wouldn't want to even if he could.

In his mind, he could already see his life dividing into "*before*" and "*after*" this moment, before Derek kissed him and after, two separate existences.

9 - After Midnight

The perfection of the moment lasted exactly until Ian's foot caught on nothing—because of course it did, because grace had never been his strong suit—and he stumbled forward, connecting with Derek's chin in a less romantic collision than their previous one, his forehead cracking against Derek's jaw with an audible thunk.

"Oh God," Ian gasped, mortification flooding through him in a hot wave that made his entire body flush with embarrassment. "I'm so sorry! Are you okay?"

Derek rubbed his chin, but his eyes danced with amusement rather than annoyance, crinkling at the corners with barely suppressed laughter. "And here I thought I was the one who was supposed to sweep you off your feet." He pulled Ian closer, his arms wrapping around him securely, dropping his voice to a conspiratorial whisper that only Ian could hear. "Though I have to admit, your way is definitely memorable."

Ian buried his face against Derek's chest, feeling it rumble with suppressed laughter, the vibration traveling through him like music. "I can't take me anywhere," he groaned, the words muffled against Derek's shirt, against the solid warmth of him.

"Good thing you don't have to," Derek replied softly, tilting Ian's chin up with gentle fingers, forcing their eyes to meet. "I'll take you everywhere."

The simple promise, delivered with such casual certainty, made Ian's heart expand in his chest until he thought it might crack his ribs. He fell back into the rhythm of the music, letting his head rest against Derek's shoulder as they swayed together, as the world continued spinning around them but they remained still, locked together.

"You move pretty well for a choir boy," Derek murmured against Ian's ear, the teasing affection in his voice creating ripples of pleasure down Ian's neck. "Any other hidden talents I should know about?"

Ian laughed, emboldened by the alcohol and the moment and Derek's arms around him. "I can whistle the entire score to 'The Sound of Music.' Does that count?"

"Oh, that definitely counts. Though I'm going to need a demonstration. Later. When we're somewhere quieter."

The casual assumption of a 'later,' of a future beyond this moment, made Ian's breath catch. "Later sounds good," he managed.

They continued swaying, and Ian marveled at how right this felt, how Derek's body seemed to fit perfectly against his, how their heights aligned just so. He could feel the heat of Derek's skin through their clothes, could smell his cologne mixing with the club's atmosphere of sweat and alcohol and perfume and possibility.

"I keep thinking I'm going to wake up," Ian admitted softly, his lips brushing Derek's neck as he spoke, feeling daring. "That this is all some elaborate dream."

"If it is," Derek replied, his arms tightening around Ian's waist, "I don't want to wake up either."

They were both grinning now, faces so close Ian could see the flecks of gray in Derek's blue eyes, could count each individual eyelash if he wanted. The shared memory of years of friendship, of stolen glances and unspoken want, created yet another bridge between past and present. Ian knew with sudden clarity that there would be fallout from this, knew that the protective bubble of this perfect night couldn't last indefinitely. But right now, enfolded in Derek's arms in this safe haven pulsing with acceptance, surrounded by people who celebrated rather than condemned, Ian felt invincible.

He felt possible.

Without breaking eye contact, Derek took Ian's hand and led him through the crowd, away from the pulsing lights and thumping bass, navigating with practiced ease. Ian raised his free hand to his friends, who had been watching the entire impossible scene unfold with expressions ranging from shock to delight to concern.

Shawnee smiled broadly and clapped her approval, making exaggerated excited gestures. Renee waved with characteristic enthusiasm, bouncing and mouthing "OH MY GOD." Amelia gave a thumbs up that managed to convey both support and a silent promise to analyze everything with him later, to help him make sense of it all.

They found themselves outside on the club's patio, the cool night air a stark contrast to the heated atmosphere inside, to the furnace of the dance floor. The relative quiet wrapped around them like a cocoon, providing a moment of respite after the sensory overload of the club, a chance to breathe without shouting.

The night air carried a hint of rain, though the sky above remained clear and star-scattered, the moon a sliver of silver above the city's glow. Somewhere in the distance, a siren wailed—a reminder of the city beyond their bubble of newfound intimacy, the real world that would reassert itself eventually. Derek's hand in his felt both foreign and achingly familiar, like something from a dream finally made tangible, finally real and solid and warm. Each point of contact between their palms seemed to pulse with its own heartbeat, sending sparks of awareness up Ian's arm, making him hyperaware of every nerve ending. The concrete beneath his feet still held the day's warmth, a steady anchor in a world that had begun spinning in new and dizzying ways.

Ian turned to Derek, their breaths mingling in the early summer darkness, their silhouettes illuminated by the neon glow from the club's signs—red and blue painting them in primary colors. Groups of people stood around talking, some seated at the patio furniture,

cigarette embers glowing like fireflies in the dim light, conversations creating a low murmur of background noise. Derek led Ian to a secluded corner, where they stood looking at each other for a moment, reality beginning to reassert itself in the space between them, bringing with it questions and complications.

"Well... I was not expecting this tonight," Derek said with a soft laugh that held notes of wonder and disbelief, his head shaking slightly.

Ian laughed nervously in response, his hand still held within Derek's larger one, not wanting to let go, afraid that if he did this moment would evaporate.

Derek's smile faded, a shadow passing over his features like clouds across the moon. "Your birthday..." He shook his head, regret etching lines around his mouth, aging him momentarily. "I can't believe we—I—forgot."

"It's OK, really," Ian assured him, squeezing his hand, wanting to erase that guilt from Derek's eyes. "You don't need to explain. With Gavin's wedding coming up next week, I guess I can understand how it might slip minds. Shawnee, Renee, and Amelia have been great... And, now I'm here with you... so..." He trailed off, unable to articulate exactly how insignificant the oversight seemed in light of current developments, in light of the fact that Derek had kissed him.

Derek's face flushed slightly, color visible even in the dim lighting, his eyes widening with realization. "You were checking me out at the mall earlier today!" The accusation held notes of pleased surprise rather than judgment, almost delighted.

A smile spread across Ian's face, wide and uninhibited, and he nodded without shame, without the reflexive denial that would have come so easily before tonight. The simple admission felt revolutionary—he didn't have to lie or make excuses or pretend. He could be honest about his attraction, and the world hadn't ended. The realization hit him with the force of revelation: honesty felt amazing.

Derek laughed, the sound rich and genuine, filling the night air with warmth, then his expression shifted to something more serious, almost contemplative, weighted with importance. "So... Are you an out and proud gay man now?"

"As of today, but just to the girls... and you, now. I guess..." Ian replied, his voice still carrying a note of wonder at the novelty of speaking these truths aloud, of claiming this identity in words rather than just in the privacy of his own mind.

Derek nodded thoughtfully, his thumb tracing patterns on Ian's hand that sent shivers up his arm, that made him want to press closer, to eliminate all distance between them. His eyes traveled over Ian's face, then down to his shoulders, lingering with an appreciation that made Ian's breath catch.

"You look really good tonight, Ian," Derek said softly, his voice warm with sincerity. "I love that sweater on you. I always have. It brings out your beautiful eyes."

Ian's eyes widened in shock.

He did remember.

"You... You really remember this sweater?"

Derek's lips curved into a knowing smile, his gaze intense and unwavering as he met Ian's stunned expression. "I remember more than you think, Lane."

The childhood nickname, combined with the revelation that Derek remembered details Ian thought were long forgotten, sent Ian's heart racing. All those times Ian had pulled this sweater from his closet, holding onto Derek's offhand compliment from years ago—and Derek had remembered it the whole time.

"I guess I kind of always knew..." Derek continued, his voice dropping lower, more intimate, "but you're my best friend's little brother, so I never in a million years ever thought that..."

"I know, Derek," Ian said, his eyes crinkling with understanding, seeing the complication dawn in Derek's expression. The complexity of their situation hovered between them, acknowledged but temporarily set aside, a problem for tomorrow.

Derek moved closer, eliminating the last bit of distance, his voice dropping to a whisper that made Ian lean in to catch the words, to not miss a single syllable. "You've always had a special place in my heart, Ian. But now... I think we've passed a point of no return." He placed both hands on Ian's cheeks, the touch reverent, as if Ian were something precious and breakable. "Happy Birthday, Ian. Happy, happy, happy birthday..."

"So, does this mean I get special treatment now?" Ian said, surprising himself with his ability to flirt, to be playful in this moment of intensity, to match Derek's energy.

Derek looked at him with a wink, his expression turning mischievous, promising. "Oh, I think I can arrange something special for the birthday boy."

Ian blushed at the implication, heat flooding his cheeks and spreading down his neck, and Derek pulled him close once more, their bodies aligning from chest to hip.

Their lips collided again, this kiss different from the first—less tentative, more demanding. It ignited a fiery heat that sent shivers cascading down Ian's spine like falling stars. Derek's hands roamed eagerly down Ian's back, fingers spanning his waist—so narrow Derek's hands nearly met in the middle—before continuing lower to cup his ass, pulling him closer until there was no space left between them, until Ian could feel every line of Derek's body against his own. The solid heat of Derek's body pressed against his sent waves of desire crashing through

Ian's system, awakening a hunger he'd only theoretically understood before this moment, transforming abstract want into visceral need.

Ian could feel Derek's arousal pressing against his hip, getting harder and insistent, and it made him dizzy with want and power and the knowledge that he was the cause of it, that Derek wanted him too. His own body responded in kind, and he pressed closer, shameless in his need, in his desire to eliminate every millimeter between them.

Just as the kiss deepened further, just as Derek's tongue swept into Ian's mouth and Ian moaned softly against his lips, a voice cut through their private world, jagged with surprise and something sharper, something that made Ian's stomach clench with instinctive wariness.

"Lawson?!"

Derek and Ian pulled apart reluctantly, their eyes locked in silent communication before Derek turned toward the sound, his body tensing, his jaw clenching. Ian's gaze followed, his heart still racing from the kiss, now accelerating further with apprehension, with the sense that something important was about to shift.

In the dimly lit corner of the patio, half-hidden in shadows, a group of four men huddled together, their voices hushed as they passed a joint between them, the sweet smell of marijuana drifting across the space. The one who had called out—a striking young man in his early twenties—strode over with the easy confidence of someone accustomed to being noticed, to commanding attention. He stood at 5'10" with a lean frame of approximately 150 lbs, his sandy brown hair neatly parted down the middle and cascading to frame a face with chiseled features that belonged on magazine covers. His royal blue short-sleeved button-down clung to his toned physique, clearly chosen to accentuate his assets, the top three buttons undone to reveal a smooth chest.

"Chris... Uh, hey man. How's it going?" Derek's discomfort was palpable in the sudden tension of his shoulders, in the forced casualness of his tone that didn't quite land, that rang false even to Ian's inexperienced ears.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't Derek Lawson," Chris replied, his eyes moving between Derek and Ian with calculating assessment, taking inventory, measuring and judging. "Still corrupting the youth, I see?"

The words landed like a slap, and Ian felt his face flush with a mixture of embarrassment and anger. Corrupting?

Derek laughed uncomfortably, the sound hollow and defensive, glancing at Ian with an apologetic wince. "Come on, Chris. You know I've been coming here since I was younger than Ian."

"Oh, I remember." Chris scoffed, his pleasant features hardening slightly with an emotion Ian couldn't quite identify—bitterness? Jealousy? Old hurt? "You were so green back then. Now look at you, all grown up and playing mentor."

The emphasis on 'mentor' made it sound dirty, made Ian feel naive and used even though nothing about the past hour had felt that way.

Chris closed the distance between them, embracing Derek in a hug that seemed designed to establish dominance rather than express affection, his hands lingering too long on Derek's back, his body pressing too close. As they separated, Chris turned his attention fully to Ian, his eyes raking over him with an assessment that made Ian want to shrink back, to hide. Ian mustered a smile that felt brittle on his face, false and unconvincing.

"And who is this... incredibly handsome, and extremely young man?" Chris asked, his tone a disconcerting mixture of curiosity and something sharper, more caustic, almost predatory.

Derek stumbled over his words, his usual composure fracturing, cracking like ice under pressure. "Uh... This...! This is an old friend of mine, Ian."

Chris laughed, the sound edged with mockery, sharp enough to cut. "Old? This boy doesn't look a day over sixteen, Lawson. Hello, Ian. I'm Chris." He extended his hand, which Ian shook hesitantly, feeling like he'd wandered into the middle of a play without knowing the script, without understanding the history these two men shared or what it meant for him.

Derek rushed to explain, the words coming faster than his usual measured pace, stumbling over themselves in his haste. "I've known this kid for his entire life. He's my best friend's little brother. It's actually his eighteenth birthday today!"

Chris's eyes lit with recognition, his expression shifting from suspicious to something closer to amused condescension, a cat who'd just spotted a particularly interesting mouse. "Ah, yes! Gavin Mitchell's little brother! I can definitely see the resemblance!" His gaze swept over Ian with renewed interest, cataloging features, making comparisons. "Happy birthday, Ian. It's very nice to meet you. I went to college with your brother!" His attention shifted back to Derek, a calculated casualness entering his posture that felt anything but casual. "I used to date Blake... Until he met Derek, here..." He turned back to Derek, the barb delivered with practiced precision, a knife wrapped in silk. "How is Gavin? He and Hillary are getting hitched, right?"

Derek nodded, clearly uncomfortable with the turn in conversation, his jaw tight. "Gavin's doing great. He's officially a dentist. He's got his own practice opening up in downtown Grosse Pointe in a few months. The wedding is this upcoming Friday. I'm the best man, and Ian's a groomsman."

"Oh, isn't this just peachy?" Chris's enthusiasm had the artificial brightness of department store lighting, fluorescent and cold. "So, I guess it's official then—you and Blake are finally done."

Derek shifted his weight, his hand finding the small of Ian's back as if to ground himself, to remember what was real and present versus this ghost from his past. "Yeah, we decided it was best to end things."

Chris nodded with exaggerated understanding, his head bobbing like a marionette. "Relationships can be a real bitch. You two were together for quite a while, eh? But hey, you know what they say—when one door closes, another one opens." He turned his attention back to Ian, his smile not quite reaching his eyes, stopping somewhere around his cheekbones. "Is this your first time at Menjo's?"

Ian nodded, increasingly aware that he was a pawn in some game whose rules he didn't understand, watching a match play out in a language he didn't speak. "Yes, it is."

Chris laughed, the sound like glass cutting through the night air, sharp and dangerous. "Of course it is, you're only eighteen today! It's probably your first time out anywhere. And look at you now...kissing Derek Lawson on the patio. There are a million guys who would kill for that opportunity, Ian. The birthday boy is making some bold moves." He looked back at Derek, his tone sharpening to a fine point, honing itself on old grievances. "What does Gavin think about all this?"

Derek raised an eyebrow, his arm tightening around Ian's waist protectively. "About all what?"

"Oh, Derek, come on!" Chris's laughter held an edge now, like the glint of a blade catching light, promising to cut. "What does he think about you having your tongue down his barely legal brother's throat and both hands on his ass! I'm sure this is all quite a little scandal."

The crude reduction of what had felt beautiful—sacred, even—to something sordid and predatory made Ian's stomach clench. He felt heat rush to his face, embarrassment and anger mingling in his bloodstream like oil and water, refusing to mix, both demanding attention. He looked down, unable to maintain eye contact during such a crude assessment of what had felt moments ago, like something transformative, like the beginning of everything.

"Alright, Chris," Derek said, his voice dropping to a register Ian had never heard before—low and dangerous, a calm surface over deep currents, over violence barely contained. "I know you and I have a 'rocky' past, but that's what it is: The past. If your mission was to ruin a romantic moment, embarrass Ian, and piss me off...well, congratulations. Mission accomplished." His jaw clenched, the muscle jumping visibly. "Now please go back to your little crew, smoke your joint, and gossip all you want about us..." He took Ian's hand firmly in his own, the gesture both protective and defiant, a claim and a shield. "Ian and I have more important things to do."

As they walked away from Chris and his friends, Ian could feel the tension radiating from Derek's body, every muscle taut, stiff with

barely contained anger. The cool confidence that had characterized him on the dance floor had been replaced by something more volatile, a storm system moving beneath still waters, pressure building.

Before they reentered the club, Derek pulled Ian close and kissed him softly—a kiss so different from the heated ones before, this one tender and almost apologetic, a gesture that felt like both an apology and a reclamation, taking back what Chris had tried to taint. He squeezed Ian's hand gently, silently communicating reassurance, trying to push comfort through skin and bone.

"Don't worry, Ian," Derek said, his voice gentle but firm, forcing calm into words even as his body vibrated with residual anger. "I've been out and coming to places like this since I was 16. I've seen and experienced a lot. But being here with you tonight... It's making me see everything through fresh eyes again." His thumb stroked across Ian's knuckles, soothing. "I know that was embarrassing, but we can't let them win. You're here, you're safe, and you're enjoying your birthday. That's all that matters."

Ian nodded, grateful for Derek's support and the way he'd handled the awkward encounter even while questions multiplied in his mind like cells dividing. As they re-entered the club, the pulsing music enveloped them once more, a wall of sound that helped push the uncomfortable exchange to the background of Ian's awareness, drowning it in bass and synthesizers. Still, beneath the surface excitement of the night, questions stirred and swirled like sediment disturbed from a riverbed—what had really happened between Blake and Derek? And most pressingly, most terrifyingly, what would Gavin think about what was developing between them?

The bass from inside the club throbbed through the walls, a steady counterpoint to Ian's racing thoughts, to the anxiety trying to claw its way up his throat.

"You know," Derek said suddenly, his voice oddly contemplative, breaking through Ian's spiral, "I just realized something terrible."

Ian's stomach dropped, anxiety flaring hot and immediate.

"What?"

"I've become one of those creepy older guys at the club." Derek's expression was so genuinely distressed, so comically horrified, that Ian couldn't help but laugh, the tension in his chest dissolving slightly like sugar in water. "I used to make fun of them, and now I am them. Next thing you know, I'll be wearing gold chains and asking people if they want to see my vintage disco collection."

The absurdity of the image scattered Ian's anxious thoughts, replacing them with amusement, with affection for this man who could make him laugh even while processing humiliation. "Well, if it helps, you're definitely the hottest creepy older guy here."

Derek clutched his chest in mock offense, his eyes dancing with renewed mischief, the storm clouds clearing. "I'm choosing to focus on the 'hottest' part and ignore the rest. Though for the record, I'm twenty-three, not eighty-five."

"Still old enough to remember eight-tracks," Ian teased, finding his footing again, finding his voice.

"Okay, now you're just being cruel," Derek replied, but he was grinning, pulling Ian closer. "For that, I'm going to make you listen to me explain the plot of every episode of 'Full House' in chronological order."

"That's not a threat, that's a promise," Ian shot back, surprised by his own boldness, by how easy this felt despite everything.

As Derek's hand remained firmly in his, guiding him back to the dance floor, Ian decided to push his worries aside, at least for now. Tonight was about celebration, about new beginnings, about claiming joy in the face of people like Chris who wanted to diminish it. Tomorrow, they could face the complications that reality would surely bring.

For now, he would dance.

For now, he would let himself want and be wanted without apology.

As they re-entered the club, the pulsating rhythm of the music enveloped them once more, the heavy bass vibrating up through the soles of Ian's shoes, traveling through his bones, resetting his heartbeat to match its tempo. Derek led him through the crowd with practiced ease, their hands intertwined, fingers laced together in a grip that felt both casual and intentional, until they reached the dance floor where bodies moved in a hypnotic mass, a single organism made of light and sound and desire.

The DJ had switched to a heart-pumping techno remix of Madonna's "Like A Prayer," the familiar melody almost unrecognizable beneath layers of synthesized beats that built and crashed like waves. Derek pulled Ian against him, their bodies aligning with natural precision, with the kind of fit that felt destined rather than accidental. Each movement between them felt primal and instinctual, as if they'd danced together across lifetimes, as if their bodies had been having this conversation long before their mouths caught up.

Ian had always loved this song, its lyrics about a love so intense it transcended the ordinary, becoming almost spiritual in its power. The words seemed newly prophetic now, describing exactly what he felt in Derek's arms—something bigger than himself, something that felt like worship and surrender and coming home all at once.

"Life is a mystery. Everyone must stand alone. I hear you call my name, and it feels like home!"

The pulsing rhythm pulled them closer still, Derek's arms encircling Ian completely, creating a shelter, a world within the world. Ian could feel the solid warmth of Derek's chest against his own, their heartbeats finding synchronicity despite the chaotic tempo surrounding them, two rhythms becoming one.

"When you call my name, it's like a little prayer. I'm down on my knees. I wanna take you there!"

As they moved together, Ian caught sight of his friends across the floor. Shawnee was attempting to teach Amelia what she enthusiastically described as her "signature move"—a complex series of movements that seemed to involve equal parts hair flipping and what looked like an interpretive dance version of a car wash, complete with exaggerated hand motions. Amelia, ever the academic, appeared to be taking mental notes between somewhat stilted attempts to replicate the motion, her face a study in concentration.

"In the midnight hour, I can feel your power. Just like a prayer, You know, I'll take you there!"

"Your friends are something else," Derek murmured against Ian's ear, his lips brushing the shell of it, sending shivers cascading down Ian's neck, watching the impromptu dance lesson with amused affection.

"They're ridiculous," Ian agreed fondly, warmth spreading through his chest at the sight of them—these people who loved him enough to bring him here, to celebrate him, to protect him. "But they're my ridiculous."

Derek's hands slid lower on Ian's back, settling at the curve where spine met hips, fingers pressing into sensitive hollows. "I like that they're protective of you," he said, his voice dropping lower, more intimate. "Shows they know what they've got."

Ian's breath caught, his body responding to Derek's touch with embarrassing enthusiasm, heat pooling low in his belly. "And what's that?"

"Something precious," Derek replied simply, and the sincerity in his voice made Ian's eyes sting with unexpected emotion.

"I hear your voice. It's like an angel sighing. I have no choice, I hear your voice. Feels like flying!"

As they turned, Derek's breath ghosted over the sensitive skin of Ian's neck, causing goosebumps to erupt along his arms, raising the fine hairs there.

"I close my eyes. Oh, God I think I'm falling out of the sky. I close my eyes. Heaven help me!"

The scent of Derek's cologne, mixed with the musky aroma of exertion and the faint tang of beer, filled Ian's nostrils, intoxicating him further, making him dizzy with want. It was a scent he'd caught glimpses of over the years—when Derek would ruffle his hair in passing, or during those rare hugs at family gatherings—but never this close, never this concentrated, never while Derek's hands were on his body and his lips were so close Ian could feel his breath.

"In the midnight hour, I can feel your power!"

Ian's hands tentatively explored the planes of Derek's back, feeling the shift of muscle beneath his palms as they danced, memorizing the topography of him. He marveled at how perfectly they seemed to fit together, like two pieces of a puzzle that had been searching for each other across time and space and all the years of not-quite-looking, of almost-touching, of wanting from a distance.

"Just like a prayer. You know I'll take you there!"

As the chorus swelled around them, Derek pulled Ian impossibly closer, eliminating any remaining space between them, pressing their bodies together from chest to thigh. Ian could feel the rapid rise and fall of Derek's chest, mirroring his own quickened breathing, could feel Derek's heart hammering against his own through the thin barriers of their shirts. Their faces were mere inches apart, and Ian found himself lost in the depths of Derek's eyes, dark with an intensity that made his heart race even faster, that made his mouth go dry.

"Like a child you whisper softly to me. You're in control just like a child. Now I'm dancing..."

In that moment, surrounded by the pulsing lights and thrumming music, the rest of the world seemed to fade to watercolor impressions, bleeding at the edges, becoming less substantial than this—than Derek's hands on his body, than the heat building between them. There was only Derek—his touch, his scent, the heat of his body moving in perfect harmony with Ian's own. It was overwhelming,

intoxicating, and Ian never wanted it to end. He wanted to live in this moment forever, suspended in amber, preserved in the space between breaths.

"It's like a dream. No end and no beginning. You're here with me. It's like a dream... Let the choir sing!"

Across the dance floor, Ian saw Shawnee's hair swirl around her as she moved with the music's flow, a dark halo catching the lights. Renee and Amelia danced nearby, their faces bright with enjoyment, with the kind of joy that came from watching someone you loved claim their happiness. The three of them waved when they caught his eye, their supportive presence a comfort even from a distance, a reminder that he wasn't alone in this, that he had people who would catch him if he fell. Ian couldn't believe that he was really here, dancing with the man who had captured his heart from afar for so long, all while surrounded by people who accepted him completely, who celebrated him. He savored each second, knowing that this would be a memory he would revisit countless times in the years to come, that he would return to this night, this very moment, again and again when he needed to remember what it felt like to be brave.

"Just like a prayer. No choice, your voice can take me there!"

When they were both gleaming with perspiration, Ian's legs heavy from continuous movement, his shirt clinging to his back with sweat, Derek grabbed his hand and led him off the dance floor to a secluded corner where the music's volume allowed for conversation without shouting, where they could hear each other over the pounding bass.

"Ian," Derek began, his voice low and intimate despite the surrounding noise, made intimate by proximity and intention. One hand came up to cup Ian's face, thumb stroking along his cheekbone in a touch that felt reverent, worshipful. "I know this night has been a whirlwind, and I don't want to push you into anything you're not ready for. But..." He paused, gathering his thoughts, his tongue darting out to wet his lips in a gesture that drew Ian's gaze like a magnet. "Would you like to come with me to my loft... tonight?"

The question hung between them, laden with implication, heavy with possibility and promise and the weight of choices that would change everything. Ian felt his heart accelerate, a mixture of desire and nervousness flooding his system, adrenaline and want and a hint of fear all mixing into something that tasted like potential. His brain, helpfully, chose this moment to produce a rapid and entirely unhelpful montage: every time he'd stumbled over his own feet, every

conversation he'd killed with a poorly timed silence, every instance of being the least experienced person in any given room. Which was all of them. He was always the least experienced person in every room.

"Your *loft*?" Ian responded, the words coming out a little too fast, like he'd rehearsed confidence but hadn't quite settled into it yet. He swallowed, forcing a smirk that didn't fully hide the nerves flickering behind it, trying to match Derek's energy, to be the version of himself he imagined Derek wanted — the one who didn't have to remind himself to breathe. "Planning on giving me a private tour?"

Derek's eyes darkened further, his pupils swallowing the blue until only thin rings remained, his smile slow and promising in ways that made Ian's knees weak. "Well, I was thinking of giving you the grand tour. Starting with the bedroom... and possibly ending with — the bedroom." His voice dropped further, rough with want, sending a shiver down Ian's spine that had nothing to do with the air conditioning. "Did I mention I have a California King? It's like sleeping on a cloud, if clouds were made of Egyptian cotton and — sexual tension."

Ian's heart raced at the proposition, his imagination supplying images that made his face heat, made his body respond in ways he was grateful the club's dim lighting concealed. He'd dreamed of this for so long, had imagined scenarios in the privacy of his bedroom with the door locked and the guilt arriving reliably afterward like a second guest — but now that it was here, actually being offered, the reality was almost too overwhelming to process. This was real. Derek was real, standing here, offering him everything he'd ever wanted, and Ian's brain had apparently decided that the correct response was to go perfectly, uselessly blank.

"I... I'd like that," Ian said, stumbling slightly over the words as they caught in his throat. His brain raced ahead of him, grasping for excuses, for something that made this feel less reckless — not because he didn't want it, but because wanting it this much felt dangerous, felt like standing at the edge of something with no railing. "I'll probably be grounded for a month, but my parents forgot my birthday, so—" he gave a small, awkward shrug, immediately second-guessing how that sounded, whether it made him seem young or whiny or both, "—I think they owe me one? I'll say I fell asleep at Shawnee's." His mouth felt dry with anticipation, his pulse a steady drum in his ears, drowning out rational thought. "But I should let the girls know. They're my ride, and I don't want them to worry."

Derek nodded, understanding immediately, respect clear in his expression. "Of course. Let's find them."

They made their way through the crowd, searching for Shawnee, Renee, and Amelia, Derek's hand warm and sure in Ian's, anchoring him. Ian became acutely aware of the attention they were

drawing, and immediately assumed it was about him — not in a good way. His posture shifted without thinking, shoulders tightening, his free hand almost lifting to fix his hair before he stopped himself, suddenly unsure what to do with his body, with his face, with any of it. Guys who clearly recognized Derek were practically straining their necks to see who this mystery boy holding Derek Lawson's hand was. Some faces showed obvious jealousy, eyes narrowing as they took in Ian's youth and the possessive way Derek's fingers were intertwined with his. Others looked genuinely happy, smiling with the kind of joy that came from seeing someone find connection in a place designed for exactly that. A few looked confused, clearly trying to place Ian's face, wondering if he was someone they should know.

Ian was aware of all of it in the hyper-conscious, slightly nauseating way of someone who had spent most of his life trying to be unobtrusive and was now failing spectacularly at it. He felt Derek's grip tighten slightly, protective and proud, as if to say yes, he's with me to anyone watching — and Ian held onto that, used it like a handrail, because without it he wasn't entirely sure his legs would keep cooperating.

They found the trio near the dance floor, laughing and chatting with Marcus and Perry, who appeared to have adopted Ian's friends as honorary family members in the span of an evening, trading stories and phone numbers.

As Ian approached, Derek stayed a few feet back to give them some privacy. Shawnee was the first to notice them, her radar for significant moments finely tuned after years of friendship. Her eyes widened, a knowing smirk playing on her lips as she took in their clasped hands, their flushed faces, the way they stood close enough to share breath. "Well, well, well. Look who's back!"

Amelia and Renee turned, their expressions a mixture of curiosity and barely contained excitement, of hope and concern warring for dominance. Amelia pushed her glasses up her nose, eyes taking in every detail with her usual analytical precision, cataloging and assessing. Renee looked like she might explode with questions at any moment, vibrating with the effort of holding them in.

"Hey guys," Ian said, heat rising to his cheeks under their collective scrutiny, under the weight of their knowing gazes — three pairs of eyes that had known him his entire life and could read him like a book he'd never learned to close properly. "Um, I wanted to let you know... Derek's offered to take me home."

There was a moment of loaded silence as the implications of his words sank in, as the air between them became thick with understanding. Then Renee broke into a wide grin that threatened to split her face, joy and concern and excitement all tangled together.

"Oh my God, Ian! Are you *sure*?" she asked, her voice filled with both excitement and barely concealed concern, walking the tightrope between supporting his choice and protecting him. Her eyes darted between Ian and Derek, assessing, reading body language.

Ian nodded, squeezing Derek's hand for reinforcement, for courage — squeezing perhaps a little harder than he meant to, if Derek's slight eyebrow raise was any indication. "Yeah," Ian said, then firmer, like he needed to hear it out loud to believe it himself: "I am." The simple declaration felt monumental, a claiming of his own desires without apology or shame — and also, underneath that, deeply terrifying in the way that all true things were, the way that anything worth saying sat in your throat for years before it came out.

Amelia stepped toward Derek, her protective instincts visibly engaging, her usual social awkwardness replaced by fierce determination. She looked Derek straight in the eye, her gaze steady and unwavering, holding his with an intensity that made even Derek shift slightly. "Derek, we've all known you for years, and I trust you. But I swear on everything that is holy, if you hurt him—"

"I won't," Derek interrupted, his voice firm and sincere, meeting her gaze without flinching. "I care about Ian. I promise I'll take good care of him." The conviction in his voice seemed to satisfy Amelia, who nodded once, sharply, her assessment complete.

Ian watched this exchange from slightly behind Derek's shoulder — the same instinctive position he'd occupied all night, he was beginning to notice, the gravitational pull toward the half-step back, the slight reduction of self — and felt simultaneously grateful and embarrassed that his friends were conducting what amounted to an interview on his behalf. It was exactly what he needed and exactly the sort of thing that would have humiliated him under any other circumstances.

Shawnee, who had been uncharacteristically quiet, finally spoke up, her usual brashness tempered with something softer. "Ian, this is Derek Lawson. He's gorgeous and he's older and you've had a crush on him for literally your entire conscious life. This is how people get hurt." Her eyes searched Ian's for any sign of hesitation, any hint of doubt or pressure, ready to extract him if needed.

"I don't—" Ian stopped, his voice catching, the weight of all three of them staring at him pressing in, the way it always did when a room expected something from him. He could feel the old response assembling itself — the hedge, the deflection, the oh, I don't know, maybe, whatever you guys think — and for one long second it genuinely competed with everything else he was feeling. He swallowed hard, then pushed through anyway. "I don't care if you think I'm making a mistake. I mean — maybe I am. I don't know." A nervous laugh slipped out before he could stop it, involuntary and slightly too high, and he felt his

face go warm with it, but he didn't back down. "But this is what I want. This is... my choice. And if you're my friends, you'll let me make it."

The three girls stood shocked at Ian's sudden growth of a backbone. Ian was a little shocked himself, if he was being completely honest. He could feel his own heartbeat in his palms.

"What will you tell your parents?" Amelia asked.

"I'll say I crashed after pigging out on pizza at one of you guys' houses." He said it with more certainty than he felt. The logistics of lying to his parents were, in fact, something he was spectacularly bad at — his face did not cooperate, his voice went up half a register, and his mother had been reading him like a first-grade primer since approximately birth. He would deal with that problem in the morning.

"Are you sure? Do you know what you're doing?" Shawnee asked.

Ian appreciated his friends' protective instincts, their obvious care for his wellbeing, the way they'd formed a wall around him since the moment he'd come out. But at this moment, standing here with Derek's hand in his, eighteen years old and still slightly dizzy from being kissed in a way he hadn't known was possible, he'd never felt more certain about what he wanted — even if knowing what he wanted and knowing what he was doing were, strictly speaking, two entirely different things.

"No," he said. "I have no idea. But I'm eighteen now, and I'm done waiting. I'm done being invisible."

The words surprised him a little when they arrived — cleaner and truer than he'd expected, stripped of the nervous laughter he usually used to cushion things that mattered. He felt slightly exposed by them, the way you always did when the honest version of yourself showed up uninvited and refused to apologize for it.

The girls exchanged glances, seemingly coming to a silent agreement that only those with years of friendship could manage, an entire conversation happening in looks and micro-expressions.

"Alright," Shawnee said, pulling Ian into a tight hug that smelled of her signature perfume and the sweat of dancing, of joy and celebration. "But you call me first thing in the morning, okay? And if you need anything — anything at all — you call one of us immediately."

"I will," Ian promised, hugging each of his friends in turn, pouring gratitude and love into each embrace. Renee's hug was bouncy and enthusiastic, squeezing him tight enough to crack ribs. Amelia's was briefer but no less heartfelt, her slim arms surprisingly strong, and she held on for one extra beat that said everything her words didn't.

Ian let go of her and turned back to Derek, who had been waiting with the patient ease of a man who was very comfortable in his own skin — a quality Ian was aware he himself had not yet developed and wondered if it was the sort of thing that arrived on its own schedule

or could be learned. Derek put his arm around Ian's waist as they prepared to depart, the gesture both protective and possessive, a claim he wasn't bothering to hide.

"Just remember, I've been making some friends here while you two have been canoodling in corners!" Shawnee called after them, her voice carrying across the club with typical lack of volume control, making heads turn. "If you need an escape plan, the code word is 'disco inferno.' I will personally lead a SWAT team of drag queens to your rescue!"

"Shawnee!" Ian hissed, his face burning with renewed embarrassment, the blush arriving with the reliability and enthusiasm of someone who had been waiting for exactly this cue. He wanted, briefly and specifically, to evaporate. "Could you maybe not announce that to the entire club?"

"What? I've been watching a lot of true crime documentaries lately. I'm just being prepared!" she replied unapologetically, hands on hips. "Serial killers always target the cute, innocent ones first."

"I promise no rescue missions will be necessary," Derek said solemnly, though his lips twitched with suppressed amusement. "But I appreciate knowing the Queens SWAT team is on standby."

Ian shook his head, still red, still faintly mortified — and quietly, privately, grateful beyond articulation for every single one of them. Even Shawnee. Especially Shawnee.

The moment was light, but Ian caught the protective glint in Shawnee's eye, the way she mouthed 'call me' when Derek wasn't looking, her expression fierce and loving in equal measure. Even in their humor, his friends' love for him shone through, providing a safety net he hoped he wouldn't need but appreciated nonetheless, a reminder that he wasn't walking into this alone.

As they said their goodbyes, Marcus and Perry approached, their expressions curious but welcoming, drawn by some instinct that told them their presence was needed.

"Leaving so soon, birthday boy?" Marcus asked, his eyes twinkling with understanding as they darted from Ian to Derek and back again, reading the situation with the ease of experience. "Hey, Derek."

"Hey, Marcus," Derek replied with easy familiarity, the kind that spoke of history, of shared spaces and mutual respect, then nodded to Perry. "How are you doing, Perry?"

Perry smiled and returned the nod, his hand finding its customary place on Marcus's waist, the gesture so automatic it was clearly born of years of practice.

Ian nodded, suddenly feeling shy under their knowing gazes, under the weight of what they could see—what he and Derek were

about to do written plainly across both their faces. "Derek's taking me home. We're going back to his loft."

Perry's eyes widened comically, his free hand flying to his chest in exaggerated shock, but his smile was genuine, thrilled. "Holy Madonna's cone bra! You snagged yourself a Derek-fucking-Lawson on your first night out? Kid, buy a fucking lottery ticket because your luck is on fire! And Derek," he shifted his attention, one eyebrow raised in warning that was only half-joking, "you better treat this cinnamon bun right, or you'll have the entire Menjo's army after you faster than you can say 'YMCA'."

"Don't I know it," Derek replied with a laugh, pulling Ian close to his side possessively, protectively. He pressed a kiss to Ian's temple, a casual gesture that felt anything but to Ian—it felt like a claim, like a promise, like something precious being handled with care.

"I'm going to run to the bar to grab a pen and a piece of paper. I think Shawnee and the other girls might be a bit more comfortable letting you go with me if they have my phone number and address," Derek said, demonstrating a thoughtfulness that made Ian's heart squeeze. He kissed Ian briefly, his lips warm and reassuring, then headed toward the bar, weaving through the crowd with practiced ease.

As Derek disappeared into the throng of bodies, Marcus and Perry stayed with Ian, their faces etched with a mixture of fondness and concern, creating a protective circle around him. The temporary privacy created a bubble of unexpected intimacy amid the club's chaos, a moment suspended between celebration and reality.

Perry chuckled, exchanging a knowing glance with Marcus that spoke of private conversations, of memories they shared. "First times at Menjo's tend to be life-changing. Especially when you meet someone special. We all saw that kiss, Ian. I could've sworn I saw fireworks!" His voice carried genuine happiness for Ian, no trace of mockery or condescension.

Ian felt his cheeks heat at the memory, at the knowledge that their moment had been witnessed by so many, that what had felt so private had been so public. He glanced toward the bar, where Derek was writing something on a cocktail napkin, his movements carrying the same fluid grace that had entranced Ian on the dance floor, his brow furrowed in concentration. There was something unbearably touching about Derek being so responsible, so careful to ensure Ian's comfort and safety, taking the time to do this right.

Marcus reached into his pocket, extracting a small business card with the logo of a graphic design firm embossed in one corner, the cardstock thick and expensive between his fingers.

"Listen, Ian. We know how overwhelming all of this can be. Coming out, first relationships, figuring out your place in the community... There is no instruction handbook. It's a lot." His voice

carried the weight of someone who'd walked this path and understood its particular challenges, its specific fears and joys. "More than a lot, actually. It can feel like drowning sometimes."

Perry nodded in agreement, his usual theatrical manner subdued by sincerity, by the seriousness of what they were offering. "We've been where you are, kid. And we want you to know you're not alone. If this works out...if it doesn't...you have us, ok? No judgment, no questions asked."

Marcus held out the card to Ian, the simple rectangle somehow imbued with profound significance, with the weight of community and chosen family. "This has both our numbers on it. If you ever need advice, or just someone to talk to who understands, you call us. Anytime, day or night. I mean that—three in the morning, doesn't matter."

Ian took the card, his throat constricting with unexpected emotion, with gratitude so overwhelming it threatened to spill over as tears. The cardstock felt substantial in his hand, real and solid. "Really?"

"Really," Perry affirmed, one hand squeezing Ian's shoulder with gentle pressure, with reassurance. "Whether it's relationship drama, family issues, or you just need a friendly ear, we're here for you. We've only known you for one night, but some connections just feel right, you know? Like we've been waiting for you to show up."

"Despite all the drama, the gay community is a family," Marcus added, his expression open and warm, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "And as of tonight, you're part of it. It's not all gossip and backstabbing like TV shows would have you believe. That means you've got support, even when things get tough. Especially when things get tough."

Ian clutched the card tightly between his fingers, overwhelmed by their kindness, by the immediate acceptance they'd offered without reservation or hesitation, by the way they'd claimed him as one of their own. "I... Thank you. Both of you. For everything tonight." His voice cracked slightly, emotion making it rough. "You have no idea what this means."

Marcus pulled Ian into a quick hug, the gesture both friendly and reassuring, his arms strong and certain. "You're going to be just fine, Ian. Remember, you're not alone in this journey. None of us are."

"Now, go get fucked!" Perry shouted with renewed theatricality, his voice carrying across half the club, causing several nearby patrons to turn with expressions ranging from shock to amusement to knowing grins.

Ian blushed furiously as he pocketed the card, the weight of it against his chest feeling like a talisman, but he couldn't suppress a laugh at Perry's characteristic lack of filter, at the absolute shamelessness that felt like permission. As he said his goodbyes, feeling like he was leaving something safe to step into something unknown, he felt a newfound sense of belonging wash over him. He had Derek, he had

his friends, and now he had Marcus and Perry. For the first time, he truly believed that everything might just work out.

Derek returned, the cocktail napkin folded neatly and handed it to Shawnee, who tucked it into her purse with surprising care, treating it like the valuable information it was. "You ready?" he asked Ian, his hand extended in offering, palm up, waiting.

Ian nodded, taking Derek's hand and savoring the solidity of their connection, the way their fingers interlaced like they'd been designed to fit together.

With final hugs and promises to catch up soon—Shawnee making Derek promise one more time to take care of Ian, Renee extracting a pledge for details later, Amelia simply nodding with approval—Ian and Derek made their way toward the exit.

As they stepped out into the cool night air, Ian felt a complex mixture of nervousness and exhilaration sweep through him — and just beneath it, something smaller, tighter, like the version of himself from a few hours ago hadn't fully let go. The shy kid. The one who overthought everything. The one who almost stayed home. There was also adrenaline and desire and fear all tangled together, and he was aware, with a clarity that was almost uncomfortable, that he had absolutely no idea what he was doing or what came next or who exactly he was supposed to be now that he'd stepped outside. He was leaving behind the familiar world of his childhood and stepping into something new and unknown, a future taking shape with each step they took together, with each threshold they crossed — which sounded very clean and intentional and was, in practice, mostly terrifying.

The neon signs of Menjo's flickered behind them as Ian and Derek stood on the sidewalk, the muffled thump of bass still audible from inside the club, a heartbeat that was becoming fainter with each moment. A cool breeze wafted past them, carrying the mingled scents of the city — exhaust fumes blending with the enticing aroma of a nearby late-night food vendor selling gyros, overlaid with the distinctive petrichor of approaching rain, the air heavy with the promise of a storm. Occasional cars passed by, their headlights briefly illuminating the two men before plunging them back into the soft glow of streetlights, making them feel simultaneously exposed and hidden.

Ian shivered, partly from the cool air on his sweat-dampened skin — his shirt clinging to his back uncomfortably, the chill of it unpleasant in a way that reminded him his body was a very real and present object that other people could see — and partly from the nerves that threatened to overtake his earlier confidence, to drown the brave person he'd been inside the club. His lips still tingled pleasantly from Derek's kisses, the ghost sensation of them still present, and the warmth from dancing and the shot of tequila lingered in his bloodstream like liquid courage slowly, noticeably evaporating. He could feel it going. He

was aware of its departure in real time, like watching a fire burn down to its last small heat. But it was the butterflies in his stomach, intensifying with each passing moment, that commanded his attention, demanding acknowledgment. This was real. This was happening. He was standing on a sidewalk in Detroit at midnight with Derek Lawson, and he had no script for this, had never had a script for this, had improvised every moment of the last several hours and was beginning to feel the strain of it.

Derek stood before him, his stance both patient and quietly attentive, giving Ian space to process, to decide. A warm, reassuring smile played on his lips, but Ian could see a hint of nervousness in the way his eyes searched Ian's face, looking for doubt or regret, in the subtle tension carried in his shoulders. Derek's hands fidgeted slightly at his sides, a rare show of uncertainty from someone who typically radiated confidence, revealing that he was nervous too, that this mattered to him as well. Ian clung to that observation like a life preserver — Derek nervous, Derek fidgeting, Derek uncertain — because it was the most human thing he'd seen all night and it helped.

"Ian," Derek said softly, his voice barely audible above the ambient city noise — distant sirens, a dog barking, someone's laughter echoing down the street. "We don't have to do anything you're not ready for. We can just talk, or I can take you home if you've changed your mind. No pressure." The sincerity in his voice was unmistakable, the offer genuine.

Ian's heart swelled at Derek's consideration, at the way he was being so careful, so respectful of Ian's boundaries and inexperience. He opened his mouth to respond, but found his thoughts tangled, a mess of desire and doubt and fear and want all knotted together, each one pulling in a different direction, none of them willing to yield to the others. He closed his mouth again. Opened it. Produced nothing useful.

Derek stepped closer, close enough that Ian could smell his cologne mixing with the night air, with the scent of sweat and club smoke that clung to them both. "What are you afraid of?" he asked gently, his gaze steady and receptive, truly wanting to know, to understand.

Ian took a deep breath, tasting the lingering mint and alcohol on his tongue, the ghost of their kisses. "Everything," he admitted, the word slipping out before he could dress it up into something cooler, something less honest — before he could locate the version of himself who'd managed to flirt back there on the dance floor and borrow a little of his composure. He huffed a quiet, self-conscious laugh, glancing away for a second like he wished he could take it back, like he was weighing whether it was too late to pretend he'd said something else. "I've never done this before. Any of it... What if I'm terrible? What if you regret it? What if Gavin finds out?" The questions tumbled out, each one a fear

he'd been carrying, stacked up behind the evening's bravado like water behind a dam that had held just long enough. He paused for a moment, then added with a nervous laugh that bordered on slightly hysterical, "What if I snore?"

Derek threw his head back, his laughter ringing out in the quiet street, genuine and delighted, the sound loosening something in Ian's chest, untying the knot of anxiety slightly. Ian laughed too, mostly with relief, and felt some color return to his face that wasn't embarrassment for once.

"Hey," Derek said, reaching out to cup Ian's face, his hands warm and grounding, his touch gentle. "I'm not expecting anything. Let's just enjoy each other's company, and go from there. I can deal with your cute lil' snores. And as for Gavin... we'll figure that out together, okay? One step at a time."

The simple promise, delivered with such certainty, such calm acceptance, made Ian want to believe it was possible. That they could navigate this impossible situation, that wanting Derek didn't have to mean losing everything else. He wasn't entirely sure he did believe it — the part of his brain that had been quietly cataloguing every complication since approximately ten o'clock had opinions about one step at a time — but he wanted to, which felt like enough for right now.

A group of laughing clubgoers stumbled past, momentarily breaking the bubble of intimacy that had formed around them, their voices loud and slurred, one of them singing off-key. Ian used the interruption to gather his thoughts, to consider the magnitude of the decision before him, to weigh what he was risking against what he might gain — and to press his hands briefly against his thighs where Derek couldn't see them, drying his palms against the fabric, hoping that particular evidence of his state would remain private.

He thought about the journey that had led him here — the years of hiding, of denying who he was, the small deaths that came with each lie of omission, with each time he'd pretended to be interested in girls or laughed along with homophobic jokes or stayed silent when staying silent felt like betrayal. He thought about the courage it had taken to come out to his friends, to step into Menjo's, to acknowledge his feelings for Derek after years of burying them so deep he'd almost convinced himself they weren't real. He remembered Marcus and Perry's words: the gay community is a family. And as of tonight, you're part of it.

Ian's heartbeat thundered in his ears as his decision crystallized, hardening from something soft and uncertain into something solid he could stand on. He was tired of living in fear, tired of denying himself happiness, tired of being the good boy who never took risks or asked for what he wanted. Whatever challenges lay ahead, he wanted to face them with Derek by his side.

"Okay," Ian said, the word coming out softer than he intended, barely more than breath. He took a breath, then another, like he was stepping up to the edge of something high and needed to look down first and decide anyway. "I *want* to go with you, Derek." His fingers tightened slightly in Derek's, grounding himself — and if his hand was still faintly trembling, he hoped the grip disguised it. "I want this. I... want to be with you."

Derek's face transformed with a smile that made Ian's heart skip a beat, relief and joy mingling in his expression like sunrise breaking through clouds. He leaned in, pressing a soft, tender kiss to Ian's lips — different from the heated kisses inside, this one tasting of promise and new beginnings. As they broke apart, both slightly breathless, Derek whispered against his mouth, "Are you sure?"

Ian nodded, a surge of something warm and fierce moving through him, filling the spaces where doubt had briefly taken up residence. "I'm sure. Let's go." He said it before he could second-guess himself, which was becoming a survival strategy.

As Derek took his hand and led him toward the curb where they'd wait for a taxi, Ian felt a sense of peace settle over him, warm and sure and right — tentative, like something newly born that hadn't been tested yet, but real. He didn't know what the future held, couldn't predict how this would unfold or what consequences would come, but for once, he was excited to find out. Tonight wasn't just his eighteenth birthday — it was the beginning of a new chapter in his life, one where he could finally be true to himself, where he could want and be wanted without apology.

Just as they reached the curb, just as Derek was raising his hand to flag down an approaching taxi, a familiar voice cut through the night, jagged and unwelcome, accompanied by the acrid smell of cigarette smoke that made Ian's nose wrinkle.

"Well, well, well. Leaving so *soon*?"

The peace Ian had felt shattered like glass. They turned to find Chris leaning against the building, a cigarette dangling from his fingers like an accusation. The orange glow at its tip illuminated his face in brief, flickering pulses, revealing disheveled hair and eyes that held the glassy sheen of intoxication, unfocused and mean. His previously immaculate shirt was rumpled, half-untucked, and there was a slight sway to his stance that suggested he'd had more than a few drinks since their earlier encounter, had been nursing his bitterness with alcohol.

Derek's body instantly tensed, every muscle going rigid, his jaw clenching as he instinctively moved closer to Ian, one arm coming around his waist in a protective gesture that felt both possessive and shielding. "Chris," he said, his voice low and carrying a clear warning, a barely contained threat. "We're just heading out."

Chris pushed off the wall, stumbling slightly as he sauntered toward them, his movements exaggerated and unsteady, dangerous in their unpredictability. "I can see that. Taking the birthday boy home for some private celebration, huh?" His gaze lingered on Ian, making him squirm with discomfort, making his skin crawl with the weight of assessment and judgment. "You sure move fast, Lawson. Barely legal and already in your clutches."

The word clutches landed like a slap, reducing what Ian felt — what they had — to something predatory, something wrong. Ian felt the familiar heat rise to his face, the one he couldn't control, the one that arrived before his brain had even finished processing what had been said and announced his embarrassment to anyone watching. He hated it. He hated that his body was so readable, that every feeling he had was apparently a public event.

Ian felt his heart rate spike, a mixture of fear and indignation coursing through him like an electric current. He could taste the metallic tang of anxiety on his tongue, could feel his hands growing clammy at his sides again — so much for that — sweat breaking out along his palms. Despite his nervousness, despite the way Chris's words made him feel small and stupid and naive, he found his voice rising from somewhere deep inside him, from the same place that had given him the courage to walk into Menjo's in the first place, a place he was accessing on borrowed reserves at this point. "I'm not some naive kid," he said, surprised by the steadiness in his tone, by the anger that gave it strength — surprised that it had held, that it hadn't cracked somewhere in the middle and betrayed him. "I know exactly what I'm doing."

He didn't, entirely. But he knew enough. And he was eighteen years old and furious at being looked at like he wasn't, like he was something to be managed and warned away, like his choices belonged to everyone except him.

Chris laughed, the sound sharp and humorless in the quiet street, brittle and cruel. It echoed against the surrounding buildings, making Ian flinch involuntarily — a small, visible flinch that he immediately wished back, that he felt Chris register with the particular satisfaction of someone cataloguing weaknesses. "Oh, I'm sure you think you do, sweetheart. But trust me, you have no idea what you're getting into with this one." He jerked his head toward Derek, contempt clear in the gesture, taking another long drag of his cigarette, the ember glowing brighter for a moment like a tiny demon's eye. "Did he tell you about all the hearts he's broken? About how he—"

"That's enough," Derek interrupted, his voice like steel, cold and sharp. He stepped slightly in front of Ian, as if to shield him from Chris's verbal barbs, from the poison he was trying to inject into their night. Ian could feel the tension radiating from Derek's body like heat, could see his hands clenched into fists at his sides, knuckles white with

restraint. "Whatever issues you have with me, Chris, leave Ian out of it. This is neither the time nor the place."

The tension in the air was palpable, crackling between the three men like electricity before a storm. In the distance, a car horn honked, jarring in the tense silence that followed Derek's words, a reminder that the world was still spinning even as their small drama played out. Ian's mind raced, trying to process Chris's implications, his warnings. What was he talking about? What didn't he know about Derek? He was aware, standing here on this sidewalk, that he was eighteen years old and had known Derek for his entire life and didn't know him at all, not really, not the way adults knew each other — through history and consequence and the things that only time revealed. The gap between what he felt and what he knew had never seemed larger than it did right now, in the sick flickering light of Chris's cigarette ember.

Chris held up his hands in mock surrender, but his eyes remained cold, filled with a bitterness that made Ian shiver despite the mild night air, despite Derek's warmth beside him. "Hey, I'm just looking out for the kid. Someone should." He took a final drag of his cigarette, blowing the smoke in their direction with deliberate disregard. The acrid cloud drifted between them, stinging Ian's eyes and catching in his throat, making him cough — a small, undignified sound that he couldn't suppress, that Chris acknowledged with a faint, contemptuous smile. "Have fun, you two. And Ian? When it all goes to shit — because it will — don't say I didn't warn you."

With that, Chris flicked his cigarette to the ground and crushed it under his heel with more force than necessary, the ember briefly flaring before dying out, leaving only ash and the acrid smell of burning tobacco. He shot them one last smirk — triumphant, knowing, cruel — before turning and disappearing back into the club, the door slamming shut behind him with a finality that seemed to echo in the night, leaving them alone on the sidewalk with his warnings hanging in the air like smoke.

The silence that followed was deafening, oppressive, heavy with everything unsaid. Ian's earlier excitement had been replaced by a heavy knot of anxiety in his stomach, cold and nauseating. His hands trembled slightly, and he shoved them into his pockets to hide it, ashamed of his fear — ashamed that it was so visible, that he wore it so plainly, that he couldn't even manage to look rattled with any composure. A thin sheen of perspiration broke out on his forehead despite the cool air. His mouth felt desert-dry, and he swallowed hard, trying to dislodge the lump that had formed in his throat, trying to breathe around the tightness in his chest. He looked up at Derek, searching his face for something. Reassurance? An explanation? A denial? Something that would allow him to dismiss what had just

happened as the bitter noise of a wounded ex-boyfriend, rather than a warning from someone who actually knew things Ian didn't.

Derek's expression was a complicated mixture of anger and concern, his eyes darting between Ian and the club door as if expecting Chris to reappear at any moment. The tension in his jaw made the muscle there visibly twitch, jumping beneath his skin.

"Derek," Ian started, his voice small and uncertain in the aftermath of the confrontation, sounding younger than he wanted, more vulnerable, like the eighteen had come off somehow and he was back to being the kid who sat in the back row and hoped not to be noticed. "What did he mean about—"

"Please," Derek interrupted, his voice softening as he turned to face Ian fully, giving him his complete attention. He cupped Ian's face gently, his hands warm despite the cool night, his thumb tracing a path along Ian's cheekbone with devastating tenderness. The warmth of his touch contrasted sharply with the cool night air, grounding Ian in the present moment, pulling him back from the spiral of doubt. "Can we not let him ruin this night? He dared Blake before I did. Relationships can get messy. People get hurt. I promise, I'll explain everything. But right now, all I want is to be with you. Okay?"

Ian hesitated, Chris's words echoing in his mind like warning bells. The part of him that was still seventeen — the careful part, the cautious part, the one that had spent years quietly cataloguing every reason not to want what he wanted — pressed its case with renewed urgency, laying out its evidence in orderly rows. He looked into Derek's eyes, saw the sincerity there, the genuine care, the vulnerability Derek was showing him, and felt his doubts begin to recede like waves pulling back from shore — still present, still audible somewhere beneath everything, but no longer commanding the room. He nodded, managing a small smile that felt more convincing than he'd expected, and decided to believe it. Decided to choose that, the way he'd been choosing things all night — imperfectly, nervously, with full knowledge that he might be wrong and the stubborn conviction that he was going anyway. "Okay."

As they waited for the taxi — Derek's arm raised again, flagging down a yellow cab that pulled to the curb with a squeal of brakes — the excitement of earlier slowly began to return, trickling back in like water seeping through cracks. But there was an undercurrent of tension now, questions left unasked and unanswered, doubts planted that would eventually need to be addressed. Ian couldn't shake the feeling that the night had taken an unexpected turn, introducing complications he wasn't prepared to navigate, revealing that the path forward might be more treacherous than he'd imagined.

For the first time that evening, he felt painfully young and naive — like the version of himself from earlier hadn't actually gone anywhere, just been temporarily drowned out by music and adrenaline

and Derek's attention. Now it was back, louder than ever, asking questions he didn't have answers to, making its presence known with the particular persistence of something that had been patient for a very long time.

Was he in over his head? Had his eagerness to embrace this new part of himself blinded him to potential dangers, to red flags he should have seen? The confidence he'd felt earlier seemed foolish now, childish even — the confidence of someone who didn't know what he didn't know, who had confused the courage to begin with the wisdom to proceed. He wondered if everyone at the club had seen him the way Chris did — as an easy target, a naive kid ripe for manipulation, someone to be pitied or taken advantage of. He pressed his hands flat against his thighs inside his pockets and concentrated on the weight of Derek's arm around him, on the solidness of it.

But as Derek's arm wrapped around him, pulling him close against the night chill, against the doubts and the warnings and all the reasons this might be a mistake, Ian decided that whatever complications lay ahead, this was worth it. Derek was worth it. And tonight, on his eighteenth birthday, he was going to be brave enough to find out where this path might lead, even if it led somewhere he couldn't yet see, even if the journey turned out to be harder than he'd imagined.

He'd spent seventeen years being careful, being good, being safe.

Tonight, he chose to be brave — which was not, he was learning, the same thing as being unafraid. It just meant going anyway, with the fear right there beside you, as present and unhelpful as ever, your least favorite companion on every journey that mattered.

10 - 'Show Me Everything'

The Detroit city skyline stretched out beneath the night sky, a testimony to urban resilience and possibility, to dreams made manifest in glass and steel. Monuments to ambition reached toward the heavens, their windows twinkling like earthbound stars, like a galaxy laid horizontal for human consumption. On a deserted street, silence reigned — the kind of hushed quiet that comes in the hours between midnight and dawn — until the distant purr of an approaching engine broke the stillness. A Yellow Cab whizzed past, its headlights cutting through the darkness, carrying within it two souls standing on the precipice of something profound, something that would change them both irrevocably.

Inside the cab, Ian sat close enough to Derek that their thighs pressed together, the proximity electric, sending sparks through the denim barrier between them. He was aware of every centimeter of that contact with an intensity that made rational thought somewhat aspirational. They exchanged quick, nervous glances — Ian's heart racing every time Derek's eyes, bluer in the passing streetlights, impossibly blue, met his own. Each glance felt like a question being asked and answered, like a promise being made without words. Derek flashed a crooked smile that tugged at one corner of his mouth higher than the other — that asymmetrical grin Ian had memorized from years of covert observation, from years of looking and immediately looking away — sending blood rushing to Ian's cheeks in a heat he could feel spreading down his neck.

"You're cute when you blush," Derek murmured, his voice deeper than usual, velvety in the confined space of the cab, intimate in a way that made Ian's stomach flip. The words wrapped around Ian like silk.

Ian swallowed hard, his mouth suddenly dry, and lowered his gaze to their hands, which had somehow become intertwined during the ride — he couldn't remember the exact moment it happened, only that Derek's hand was now in his and it felt right, felt inevitable. Derek's fingers — longer, stronger, and noticeably steadier than his own trembling ones, which he was hoping Derek was attributing to the cab's vibration and not to the reality of the situation — squeezed gently, a reassurance that settled like a warm blanket around Ian's shoulders, quieting some of the nervous chatter in his mind. Not all of it. Some of it had taken up permanent residence and was not accepting eviction notices.

The cab driver remained mercifully silent, a ghost at the wheel, and Ian was grateful. He didn't want to share this moment with anyone else, didn't want any intrusion into this bubble they'd created — and also, practically speaking, he didn't trust his voice to perform normally

if someone addressed him directly right now. It was doing unreliable things.

When the cab pulled to a stop in front of a renovated industrial building — all exposed brick and enormous windows, the kind of building that spoke of lofts and artists and lives lived differently, the kind of building Ian had never been inside and couldn't quite believe he was about to enter — Derek paid quickly, his movements efficient despite the tension Ian could see in the set of his shoulders. He held the door open, gesturing with theatrical gallantry that was both ridiculous and charming. "After you, Mitchell."

"Such a gentleman," Ian quipped, though his voice caught slightly on the words, betraying the nervousness singing through his veins like electricity through wire — betraying him, as his voice had been doing all night, at the precise moment he most needed it to cooperate. He stepped out, the night air cool against his heated skin, a sharp contrast that made him hyperaware of every sensation — the breeze on his face, the sound of his shoes on pavement, the weight of this moment pressing down on him with the specific gravity of things that cannot be undone.

Derek's hand found the small of Ian's back immediately, as if magnetized to that spot, guiding him toward the entrance with sure pressure. The weight of it, warm and firm through Ian's thin sweater, sent a cascade of tingles up Ian's spine, made his breath catch, made him wonder if Derek could feel him trembling — and then made him wonder if the trembling was actually that obvious, and then made him wonder if he should say something to acknowledge it or whether acknowledging it would make it worse, and then the elevator doors opened and the wondering became someone else's problem temporarily. "I try," Derek replied with a wink that somehow managed to be simultaneously ridiculous and devastating, playful and promising all at once.

The building's lobby was industrial-chic — polished concrete floors, exposed ductwork painted matte black, Edison bulbs casting warm pools of light. Their footsteps echoed in the space, creating a rhythm that matched Ian's racing heartbeat. Ian kept his eyes moving, cataloguing details, giving himself something to focus on besides the fact that he was here, actually here, in this building, walking toward an elevator with Derek Lawson's hand at the small of his back.

In the elevator, Derek pressed the button for the top floor — of course he lived on the top floor, Ian thought, because Derek Lawson would live nowhere else, because Derek Lawson existed in the kind of spaces that felt designed for him, that accommodated his particular gravity — then leaned against the wall, studying Ian with an intensity that made breathing seem like a forgotten skill, like something he'd need to relearn from scratch. The heavy doors closed with a resonant

thud, sealing them in a bubble of anticipation, cutting them off from the outside world. The elevator climbed slowly, agonizingly slowly, each floor marked by Ian's accelerating pulse, by the way his palms grew damp with nervous sweat that he could not do anything about in an elevator with no discreet surface to remedy the situation.

The small space amplified everything — the sound of their breathing, slightly uneven; the scent of Derek's cologne mixing with something else, something earthier that Ian recognized only theoretically, from a distance, the way you recognize a country you've never visited from its flag; the heat building between them despite the physical distance of three feet that felt simultaneously like miles and inches.

"Nervous?" Derek asked softly, his voice gentle, giving Ian permission to be honest, to be scared.

"Terrified," Ian admitted with a self-deprecating laugh that came out shakier than he'd intended, more revealing than he'd meant it to be, landing somewhere between brave and desperate. "But in the best possible way." It was true — this fear felt different from the fear he'd carried for so long. This was the fear of jumping off a cliff when you wanted to fly, when you believed you might have wings, when you'd never actually tested the theory and were about to.

Derek's smile reached his eyes, creating tiny crinkles at the corners that Ian wanted to trace with his fingertips, wanted to memorize. "Me too."

"The great Derek Lawson, nervous? That can't be right." Ian's attempt at levity came out breathier than he'd intended, desire roughening the edges of his words — and he felt his face warm slightly at the sound of it, at the naked quality of his own voice, at how clearly it communicated things he wasn't sure he was ready to have communicated quite so clearly.

"Only around you, it seems." The admission hung between them, vulnerable and honest, and Ian felt something in his chest expand, grow warm and bright — felt it expand and then felt himself immediately distrust the expansion, because this was the sort of thing you felt in movies and songs and novels and he had no framework for what it meant in a real elevator with a real person who was really looking at him like that.

The elevator dinged, announcing their arrival with mechanical cheer that felt absurdly mundane given the magnitude of this moment. Derek took Ian's hand again — their fingers sliding together like they'd been designed for this exact fit — leading him down a short hallway to a heavy sliding door. Industrial, like everything else in this building, the kind of door that belonged in a warehouse or a factory, repurposed for residential dreams.

He hesitated for a heartbeat before pushing it open, and in that pause Ian saw uncertainty flash across Derek's face — a vulnerability that made him seem younger, more human, less like the untouchable god Ian had worshipped from afar. It was a small thing, that hesitation, barely a second, but Ian tucked it away carefully. Derek nervous. Derek uncertain. Derek, apparently, capable of feeling something close to what Ian had been feeling all night. The thought was simultaneously comforting and dizzying.

Ian's breath caught in his throat as he stepped into Derek's world, crossing a threshold that felt more significant than just physical space. The loft sprawled before him — a testament to its owner's personality that no amount of Gavin's stories could have prepared him for, because Gavin had only seen the surface, had only seen his best friend's space, not this intimate revelation. The door closed behind them with a boom that seemed to echo the finality of crossing this threshold, of choosing this path, of stepping into a future Ian couldn't yet see but desperately wanted — and Ian stood very still for a moment just inside the entrance, needing a second, taking it, hoping Derek couldn't tell that his heart was doing something that probably warranted medical supervision.

For a moment, Derek stood with his back to Ian, shoulders rising and falling with a deep breath — gathering courage, centering himself — before he turned. Their eyes met, and they shared a smile that held equal parts nervousness and desire, fear and want tangled together so tightly they couldn't be separated. Ian's smile was slightly smaller than Derek's, slightly more careful, the smile of someone who was very aware that his face reported everything he felt with zero editorial discretion and was trying, against considerable odds, to manage the broadcast.

The space breathed with life — exposed brick walls radiating the day's stored warmth, heat that had been building all through the summer afternoon and now released itself slowly into the night air. Floor-to-ceiling windows framed the glittering cityscape like a living painting, like art that changed moment by moment as lights blinked on and off in distant apartments, as cars traced light-trails through streets below. The soft whir of a ceiling fan created gentle currents that made the strings of fairy lights — strung across the ceiling in constellations Derek had designed — twinkle like captured stars. The mingled scents of leather from the furniture, fresh coffee from this morning's pot still sitting in the French press, and something distinctly Derek — sandalwood and citrus, masculine and clean — wafted through the air, creating an olfactory signature that Ian knew he'd remember forever, that would always mean this moment, that would ambush him in coffee shops and department stores for the rest of his life.

A vintage jukebox sat in one corner, silent but promising, its chrome catching the light and throwing it back in rainbow refractions. Derek walked over to it with quiet purpose, flipping a switch that brought the machine to glowing life. His fingers traced down the selection cards with the familiarity of someone who'd made these choices a hundred times before, finally pressing a combination of buttons with deliberate care. As he turned and walked back toward Ian, the opening notes of "Wild Horses" by The Sundays filled the loft — ethereal and haunting, Harriet Wheeler's voice floating through the space like something fragile and precious.

"Childhood living is easy to do. The things that you wanted, I bought them for you..."

Moonlight streamed through the windows, casting long, dancing shadows across the polished hardwood floors, creating an almost dreamlike atmosphere, making everything feel suspended, unreal, like they'd stepped out of time into some pocket universe where only they existed. Ian stood in the middle of it and tried very hard to look like a person who visited beautiful lofts at midnight on a regular basis and was not currently experiencing something in the vicinity of a minor religious event.

"Graceless lady, you know who I am. You know I can't let you slide through my hands..."

Ian could see Derek everywhere in this space — in the carefully curated vintage concert posters on one brick wall, in the stack of vinyl records beside the jukebox, in the architectural digest magazines fanned across the coffee table, in the weights in the corner suggesting discipline and routine, in the messiness that spoke of someone who lived here rather than just existing, who made coffee and left cups half-drunk, who threw jackets over chairs and kicked off shoes by the door. He absorbed all of it with the particular hunger of someone who had imagined a person for years and was now being given the actual coordinates.

"Wild horses couldn't drag me away. Wild, wild horses couldn't drag me away."

"So... this is me," Derek said, his normally confident voice tinged with vulnerability, with the fear of being seen, really seen, for the first time. The statement carried weight — this wasn't just showing Ian his apartment, it was showing Ian his life, his private self, the version of Derek that existed behind closed doors.

"Faith has been broken and tears must be cried. Let's do some living after we die..."

Ian's eyes widened as he took everything in, turning in a slow circle to absorb each detail, to commit this moment to memory. He was aware of his own turning — of how it must look, of whether it seemed childish or enchanted or both — but he couldn't stop himself, couldn't perform cool detachment in the face of this, didn't have that particular skill in his arsenal.

"It's incredible," he breathed, and he meant it — not just the loft, but this trust Derek was showing him, this invitation into his inner sanctum. "Like you," he added, the words escaping before he could catch them, before his brain could engage the filter that usually prevented him from saying what he really felt — and he felt the heat arrive in his face immediately afterward, the blush that always came a half-second too late to prevent the damage, the body's unhelpful acknowledgment of its own candor.

Derek's smile widened, a flash of white teeth against his tanned skin, genuine pleasure at the compliment warming his features. "I can't believe Gavin's never brought you over before."

Ian's expression clouded slightly, like a shadow passing over the sun. He shook his head, a hint of frustration tightening his jaw, tension creeping into his shoulders — and with it, something else, something younger and rawer: the old reminder that he was, fundamentally, still the little brother. Still the one who got brought places. Still the one whose access to this world had always been granted or withheld by someone else's decision. "Derek, please. Can we not talk about my brother... or the wedding... or anything to do with my family for the rest of the night?" The words came out sharper than he'd intended, edged with a desperation he couldn't quite hide, the sharp edge of someone who has been careful all evening and is running low. Tonight was his — theirs — and he didn't want the outside world intruding, didn't want to think about consequences or complications or the impossibility of what they were doing.

Derek's smile faded, replaced by a look of genuine concern, his brow creasing with worry. "Oh, shit... Ian. I'm sorry. I... I didn't mean to..." He ran a hand through his dark hair, sending it into artful disarray, the gesture betraying his nervousness in a way his usual composure never did. A nervous chuckle escaped him, self-deprecating and raw. "Well, this is a plot twist. I'm usually Mr. Smooth, but right now..." He looked down at his hands as if they held answers, then back up at Ian through long lashes that cast shadows on his cheekbones. "*Fuck*... I'm so nervous."

The admission landed between them like a gift, like Derek had handed Ian something precious and fragile. Ian felt his own anxiety ease

slightly, replaced by something warmer — affection, maybe, or tenderness, or the beginning of something deeper he didn't yet have a name for but was already afraid of losing. And beneath that: a small, almost guilty flicker of relief, because if Derek was nervous too then Ian was not uniquely, catastrophically out of his depth. He was just in unfamiliar water. They both were. That was survivable.

"Wild horses couldn't drag me away"

Ian grinned, his eyes sparkling with a confidence that arrived from somewhere he hadn't known he had access to — the same place the flirtation had been coming from all night, the place that existed just past the edge of his usual self, that he'd been borrowing from in small increments. "The great Derek Lawson, nervous? Quick, someone call the papers!" He adopted a mock-serious tone, hands gesturing dramatically like a news anchor delivering breaking coverage, leaning into it, feeding it, because the performance was easier than the silence and he was discovering that about himself in real time. "This is breaking news material right here. 'Local Heartthrob Reduced to Jelly by Awkward Newcomer.' How's that for a headline?"

Derek's laugh — rich and unguarded, genuine in a way Ian had rarely heard — filled the space between them, bouncing off the brick walls and wrapping around Ian like warmth. "I'd read that article." His eyes crinkled with amusement, but there was something else there too — gratitude, maybe, for Ian making this easier, for meeting his vulnerability with humor instead of judgment.

"Wild, wild horses couldn't drag me away..."

An awkward silence descended, charged with possibility and weight, with everything unspoken hanging between them like static electricity before a storm. They stood three feet apart — a distance that felt both infinite and negligible — yet Ian could feel the heat radiating from Derek's body, could sense the pull between them like gravity, like magnetism, like something fundamental and undeniable. The space between them hummed with tension, with want barely contained, with the knowledge that once they closed this distance, everything would change.

Ian was very aware of the three feet. He was aware of it the way you're aware of a drop when you're standing at the edge of something — not with the intention of stepping back, but with the full understanding of what stepping forward meant. His heart was doing its medically concerning thing again. His hands, at his sides, were not entirely steady. He thought about the version of himself from this morning — seventeen, careful, invisible — and felt the distance

between that boy and this moment like a physical thing, like something he could measure.

"Wild, wild horses..."

Ian's pulse thundered in his ears. He could hear his own breathing, slightly too fast, could see Derek's chest rising and falling with matching rhythm. The fairy lights cast dancing shadows across Derek's face, making him look alternately angelic and dangerous, beautiful and devastating.

"We'll ride them someday..."

He didn't step back. He didn't look away. He stood in the middle of Derek's world with his heart in his throat and his hands not quite steady, and he stayed — which was, he was learning, its own kind of bravery. Not the loud kind. The kind that just holds its ground and waits to see what happens next.

Then, as if drawn by an irresistible force — as if their bodies had made a decision their minds were still catching up to — they gravitated toward each other. One step, then another. Slow, deliberate, giving each other time to retreat if they wanted to, but neither of them retreating. Each step felt momentous, felt like crossing a border into foreign territory, felt like the most natural thing in the world — and also, underneath the natural, the terrifying: the awareness that there was no version of this where he walked back out the same person who had walked in.

"Wild, wild horses... We'll ride them someday..."

Their lips met in a kiss that felt like coming home and stepping into the unknown simultaneously, like finding something you'd been searching for your entire life without knowing you were searching, like the answer to a question you'd never been brave enough to ask. Ian's hands found their way to Derek's chest — solid and warm and real beneath his palms, more real than anything he'd ever touched, more present than anything his imagination had managed in all its years of trying — feeling the thundering heartbeat that matched his own frantic rhythm, proof that Derek was as affected as he was, that this meant something.

Derek's arms encircled Ian's waist, pulling him closer with gentle insistence, with a tenderness that made Ian's throat tight with emotion. Their bodies aligned — chest to chest, hip to hip — and Ian could feel every point of contact like a brand, like Derek was marking him, changing him on a cellular level. He had absolutely no idea what he

was doing with his hands and was moving them on instinct alone, which was either going well or terribly and he had no reference point to distinguish between the two.

The kiss deepened, Derek's tongue tracing Ian's lower lip seeking entry, asking permission with patient pressure. Ian opened to him with a soft moan that surprised them both — needy and wanting and completely unguarded, the sound arriving before he'd had any chance to curate it, to decide whether it was too much — and Derek's responding groan vibrated through Ian's body, made him dizzy with power and desire. Derek's hands began an exploration, learning the terrain of Ian's back, shoulders, and neck — each touch igniting new sensations that coursed through Ian's veins like liquid fire, like electricity, like nothing he'd ever felt before. Nothing he'd felt before was the relevant fact. He kept arriving at it.

This was nothing like Ian had imagined. Better. More. The fantasies he'd harbored in the privacy of his bedroom — desperate, half-formed imaginings born of want and loneliness, assembled from fragments of things he'd seen and read and invented — paled in comparison to the reality of Derek's mouth on his, Derek's hands on his body, Derek's breath mingling with his own. The fantasies had been silent and static. This had sound and heat and weight and the overwhelming specificity of being actually, physically here.

Derek walked Ian backward — slow steps, a careful choreography — until his shoulders met the brick wall, the rough texture a stark contrast to the velvet-soft warmth of Derek's lips trailing along his jawline and down his neck, teeth scraping sensitive skin, tongue soothing the sting. Ian gasped, the sound sharp and involuntary, his fingers tangling in Derek's thick hair with a grip that was slightly too tight before he consciously loosened it, holding him there, keeping him close, never wanting this to end. The brick was cool against his back, grounding him, reminding him this was real, this was happening, this wasn't another dream he'd wake from alone and aching.

Every point of contact between them seemed to spark with electricity — Derek's fingertips leaving trails of heat across Ian's ribs through his sweater, the press of his thigh between Ian's legs sending shockwaves through his entire body, making him hard and desperate and completely shameless about it in a way that would have mortified the version of himself from this morning and only barely embarrassed the version of himself right now. The city sounds filtered through the windows — distant sirens wailing like lonely calls, the gentle rumble of traffic, the percussion of life continuing outside — making their private moment feel even more sacred and stolen, like they'd carved out a space in time that belonged only to them.

Ian's hands roamed Derek's back, feeling muscle shift beneath fabric, learning the topography of him — broad shoulders that tapered

to a narrow waist, the dip of his spine, the curve of his lower back. He moved with more hesitation than he'd have liked, a fraction of a second behind, his hands asking questions his mouth didn't know how to form, navigating by want alone.

Derek pulled back slightly, just far enough to look at Ian, his breath coming in quick pants that Ian could feel against his swollen lips. His blue eyes, now darkened with desire until they were almost navy, searched Ian's face with both hunger and hesitation, with want tempered by care. He gently cupped Ian's face, thumbs caressing his flushed cheeks with devastating tenderness, like Ian was something precious, something worth handling with care.

"Lane," Derek said softly, the nickname intimate in the space between them, used so rarely that hearing it now felt like a secret being shared, like Derek calling him into something private and profound. "I have *no* expectations. We can stop at *any* time. Right now, your comfort and consent are the *most* important things to me."

Ian felt warmth bloom in his chest at Derek's words — not just desire, though there was plenty of that, but something deeper and more profound. Respect. Care. The kind of consideration he'd never expected, never thought to ask for, hadn't known to include in the fantasies because the fantasies had been about wanting and not about being wanted back with this kind of attention. He placed his hand over Derek's, intertwining their fingers, anchoring himself in this moment, in this reality. "Thank you, Derek," Ian replied, his voice steady despite the butterflies rioting in his stomach, despite the way his hands trembled slightly — trembling that he suspected Derek could feel and that he had given up trying to hide, because some things were simply beyond the reach of willpower. "I give you me. *All* of me."

The words hung between them, weighty with significance. This wasn't just about bodies, Ian realized. This was about trust. About vulnerability. About offering yourself completely to another person and believing they'd handle you with care — and doing it anyway even when you weren't entirely sure, even when you were eighteen years old and had no roadmap for any of this and were navigating entirely by the compass of what you felt.

Derek's expression grew serious, even as his eyes remained heated, dark with barely restrained want.

"Are you sure? This is a big step, and I don't want you to feel pressured." His voice carried genuine concern, gave Ian another opportunity to back out, to say no, to change his mind.

Ian nodded, his gaze never leaving Derek's, holding eye contact with a steadiness that cost him something — the old instinct to look away, to make himself smaller, to give the other person an easier exit, pressing at the back of his skull — so Derek could see the certainty there, could see that Ian wanted this with his whole being.

"I'm sure. I trust you, Derek. I wanna cross the line, and I want you to take me there..." His voice dropped lower, rougher with desire, roughened further by the fact that he had never said anything like this out loud to another human being and could feel the novelty of it in every syllable. "I want *you* to be my first."

The words he didn't say hung between them anyway: I've been waiting for you. It's always been you.

A slow smile spread across Derek's face, but his tone remained earnest, careful, making sure Ian understood what he was agreeing to.

"Okay," he said. "But make me a promise?"

"Anything," Ian whispered, meaning it with his entire being, willing to promise Derek the moon, the stars, anything he asked for in this moment — and also meaning it in the smaller, more specific way of someone who was aware he was out of his depth and deeply grateful for any instruction.

"Promise me you'll tell me if anything feels uncomfortable or if you want to stop... and I will stop. No matter what. Your boundaries are important to me."

Derek's eyes searched his, making sure Ian understood the seriousness of this, making sure Ian knew he had power here, had control, had the ability to say no at any point.

Ian's heart swelled with affection, with something that felt dangerously close to love — the particular, overwhelming, slightly terrifying love of someone encountering genuine care for the first time in a context where they'd expected to have to earn it. In that moment, he realized that this wasn't just desire — it was care, it was respect. Derek wasn't just taking; he was asking. He wasn't just wanting; he was considering.

"I promise," Ian said, sealing his words with a tender kiss that tasted of salt and sweetness, of hope and hunger.

As their kisses deepened — lips and tongues and teeth, messy and desperate and perfect — Derek's hands, so much larger than Ian had imagined during countless daydreams, so warm and sure, slipped beneath Ian's sweater. The first touch of skin on skin made Ian gasp into Derek's mouth — a sharp, helpless sound, entirely unplanned — his whole body responding to it before his brain had processed what had happened, the nerve endings delivering their report with an urgency that bypassed every other system. The warmth from those palms spread through Ian's body like wildfire, igniting every nerve ending, making him hyperaware of every inch of his skin, and with a moan he barely recognized as his own, he opened his mouth wider, inviting Derek's tongue to explore, to claim, to possess.

"Is this okay?" Derek murmured against Ian's lips, his hands tracing patterns of desire across Ian's torso — circles on his ribs, long

strokes up his sides, thumbs brushing the sensitive skin just below his ribcage — each touch a question, each caress asking permission.

"Yes," Ian breathed, the word arriving immediately and without any of the hesitation that governed most of his communication, because his body had opinions that did not require deliberation. His own hands mirrored Derek's movements in the imprecise, slightly uncertain way of someone following music they hadn't heard before, discovering the contours of Derek's body through the thin cotton fabric of his shirt — the defined pectoral muscles he'd admired from across crowded hallways, the radiating heat of his sun-kissed skin, the thunderous gallop of his heart beneath Ian's trembling fingertips.

"More than okay. I want it," his voice now thick with yearning, rough as sandpaper against velvet. "I've never wanted anything more... I need to *see* you... *please*."

The please arrived with more vulnerability than he'd intended. He felt it land. He let it stay.

Ian's fingers quivered like autumn leaves as he tugged at the frayed hem of Derek's navy t-shirt — quivering not performatively but simply because they were, because his entire nervous system was currently running processes it had never run before and some of the peripheral functions were suffering for it — his gaze fixated on the tantalizing glimpse of toned stomach revealed by the rising fabric: a two-inch strip of golden-bronze skin, the rippling definition of oblique muscles that curved like parentheses around his navel, a dark trail of coarse hair disappearing beneath his low-slung waistband like an arrow pointing toward forbidden treasure. He wanted — needed — to see all of this man who had populated his 3 AM dreams for so long, who had transformed from grainy yearbook photos under his pillow into warm flesh now pressing against him.

"Take off your shirt," Ian requested, his voice barely above a whisper but heavy with the weight of a thousand unsent text messages, with years of longing finally given permission to escape the prison of his throat. He heard himself say it and felt simultaneously bold and staggered by his own boldness, the two sensations arriving together, inseparable.

Derek's eyes — now a deeper blue than Ian had ever seen them, the blue of twilight oceans at thirty feet deep, of sapphires held to candlelight in a darkened room — locked with his as he nodded. In one fluid movement that spoke of casual confidence born from years of comfort in locker rooms and bedroom conquests, he pulled his shirt over his head in a cross-armed motion and let it fall forgotten to the hardwood floor with a soft whisper of fabric, a discarded remnant of the boundary between fantasy and reality.

Ian's breath caught audibly, the sharp intake echoing like a gunshot in the quiet loft. He was aware of the sound he'd made. He

didn't attempt to recover from it. The reality of Derek — all golden-bronze skin stretched over defined muscle like caramel over sculpted marble, each ridge and valley the product of discipline and countless predawn workouts — surpassed every desperate fantasy Ian had harbored in the lonely privacy of his twin bed, surpassed them so completely that the fantasies seemed in retrospect like very poor sketches of a thing that turned out to be a cathedral. Silver-blue moonlight from the uncurtained windows played across the topography of his torso, highlighting the washboard definition of his abs, the perfect symmetry of his pectorals, the slight hollow beneath his collarbone that could hold a teaspoon of rain, casting shadows that made him look like Michelangelo's sculpture brought to sweating, breathing life.

Derek's smile deepened, a spark of boastful triumph lighting his eyes. His voice dropped to a husky whisper, a velvet command.

"Now you... lift your arms."

Ian's pulse fluttered as he raised his arms — the gesture making him feel exposed in a way that was distinct from and layered beneath the physical exposure, something more interior and more vulnerable than skin — muscles stretching, adrenaline and something more potent swirling through his veins. He was aware of Derek looking at him the way he had looked at Derek, with that same focused attention, and the awareness of it was overwhelming in a way he hadn't anticipated, hadn't thought to prepare for. He had imagined wanting. He had not fully imagined being wanted back, the specific weight of it, the way it pressed against every insecurity he'd ever had and required him to hold his ground anyway.

Derek's rough-fingered reverence as he hooked his hands under the hem of Ian's sweater sent heat streaking through his spine. The knit fabric peeled upward, slipping over his shoulders, and the loft's cool air kissed every inch of bare skin — each breath drawn sharper from Derek's intense, hungry gaze on him, a gaze Ian bore with his chin up and his heart in his throat, standing in it rather than retreating from it, which was the bravest thing he had done all night.

Fingertips feathered across Ian's flat stomach, tracing the hard lines of his obliques, teasing the sensitive skin around his navel until a soft hitch escaped his lips and his muscles trembled beneath the deliberate contact — trembled visibly, unmistakably, the body's honest report of what this felt like, unedited.

At Ian's quick intake of breath, Derek leaned close, warm breath mingling with the cool air. His lips brushed Ian's temple, a slow, feathered kiss that felt like an invitation.

"You can touch me," he murmured against Ian's skin, voice low, laced with promise. "Anywhere... wherever you *want*."

Ian lifted his hands, fingers tentative at first — genuinely tentative, the tentativeness of someone who had no inherited fluency

here, who was learning the language from its first syllable — brushing against the warm expanse of Derek's chest, hard planes of muscle pulsing beneath smooth skin. He pressed a cautious palm, felt Derek's heart drum against his own hand, fast and needy. The reciprocity of it steadied him. Encouraged, he wrapped his fingers over the curve of Derek's pectoral, feeling the warmth and weight of him, eliciting a deep, rumbling chuckle that vibrated through Ian's arms and sent a rush of triumph and desire coursing through him — triumph because he had done that, because his hands had produced that sound from this person, which was still somehow incredible to him.

Derek's breath hitched. "Like what you see, Mitchell?" he teased, but the tremor in his voice betrayed his longing.

Ian's gaze locked on Derek's, dark with hunger.

"God, yes," he breathed, lips parting. He let his hands drift lower, palms sliding over the sculpted ridges of Derek's abdomen, following the downward slope into the electric valley of his v-cut — each fingertip stroke drawing a low moan that reverberated against Ian's skin and made his own breath stutter with the power of it, with the extraordinary and disorienting fact that he could do this to Derek Lawson.

Emboldened — emboldened in the specific way of someone who has discovered a capability they didn't know they possessed and is still slightly astonished by it — Ian pressed further, hands exploring every taut contour: the swell of Derek's biceps, the coiled cord of his forearms, the gentle flare of his lats. He felt the heat radiating from Derek's body, the sharp intake of breath whenever his fingertips lingered too long on a sensitive patch of skin, and he filed each response away carefully, a map he was making in real time, the only cartography he had available.

When Ian cupped Derek's flexed biceps in both hands, marvel and desire blazed through him.

"You're like something *sculpted*," he whispered, awe in every syllable — genuine, unguarded awe, the kind that in any other circumstance might have embarrassed him but right now felt like the only honest response available. "Like Michelangelo's David — alive... and on fire."

Derek's eyes softened, roaming over Ian's lithe, trembling frame — and Ian let himself be looked at, held still for it, which required more courage than anything else he'd done. "And you," Derek said, voice thick with sincerity, "are perfect." With that simple confession, Ian's chest swelled, something in him that had been braced for a very long time releasing its hold slightly, the words landing somewhere deep and necessary.

Their dance of discovery continued as Derek guided them in a slow turn, pressing his back against the brick wall. He spun Ian around

with gentle hands, pulling him close so that Ian's back pressed flush against his warm, bare chest. The feeling of their skin touching — chest to back, Derek's arms encircling him from behind like a protective cage — sent a shiver down Ian's spine that had nothing to do with cold and everything to do with want, with the years of imagining what this would feel like finally made real, the imagining and the reality occupying the same moment and neither one quite believing the other.

Derek's lips found Ian's neck, pressing heated kisses along the sensitive skin, tongue darting out to taste salt and something uniquely Ian, as his hands explored Ian's exposed torso with growing confidence. Ian leaned his head back onto Derek's shoulder, surrendering to the sensation, a deep moan escaping him — unguarded, helpless, carrying everything he felt without dilution — as Derek's teeth grazed his earlobe with just enough pressure to make him gasp.

"You like that?" Derek whispered, his breath hot against Ian's ear, sending shivers cascading down his spine.

"Yes," Ian gasped, the word barely a word at all, his body responding with undeniable enthusiasm, pressing back against Derek without conscious thought, the body moving ahead of any decision to move, his hips finding Derek's like they'd rehearsed this, which they absolutely had not.

Derek's hands traveled lower, fingers deftly undoing the button of Ian's jeans with practiced ease. The heavy denim fell away, pooling at his ankles — and Ian felt the cool air of the loft against his legs and felt suddenly, acutely aware of himself, of how much of himself was now present in this room, more present than he'd ever been anywhere — revealing black boxer briefs stretched taut over his throbbing arousal. Ian's breath hitched as Derek's thumb traced the damp spot at the tip, sending electric pulses through his groin that made his knees weaken in a way that was entirely literal, that required a conscious effort of his legs to address.

Ian turned in Derek's arms, pressing his hardness against Derek's thigh, feeling the answering heat there. His hands found the back of Derek's head, fingers tangling in dark strands that were softer than they looked — softer than he'd imagined, and he had imagined, many times, with the particular guilty precision of someone who had tried not to and done it anyway. Derek's hands glided down, palming the curve of Ian's ass — squeezing with possessive hunger that left Ian gasping, the sound escaping before he could edit it — before gripping his thighs. With a growl that vibrated through Ian's chest, Derek lifted him, and Ian's legs wrapped around Derek's waist on instinct, the friction between their bodies drawing a moan from deep in his throat that he was past caring about, past managing, past anything except feeling.

"Show-off," Ian whispered, his lips brushing Derek's, tasting salt and desire there. The word arrived with a confidence that still slightly surprised him when it came, that still felt like borrowing from some future version of himself who had done this before and knew how to be here. He rolled his hips, grinding against Derek's stomach, savoring the delicious pressure against his aching cock — and felt his face heat immediately afterward, not with shame but with the astonishment of himself, with being the person who had just done that.

Derek's eyes darkened, pupils blown wide with lust. His signature half-smile appeared as he thrust upward, creating a friction that made Ian whimper — a small, undone sound that he had no interest in taking back. "You haven't seen anything yet, Mitchell."

As Derek carried him toward the bed — a massive platform with rumpled charcoal sheets that looked sinfully inviting, that promised comfort and pleasure — Ian's heart pounded with anticipation mixed with nerves, the two sensations inseparable, the anticipation sharpened by the nerves and the nerves made bearable by the anticipation. Gently, Derek lowered him onto the edge of the mattress, and Ian scooted backward, his eyes never leaving Derek's as he laid his head on the plush pillows that smelled of Derek's shampoo, of sandalwood and citrus — the scent of him, the specific private scent that belonged to waking up in this bed, that no one outside this apartment knew — and tried to look like a person who knew what came next. He mostly managed it. His hands, gripping the edge of the sheet, gave him away slightly.

He took in the sight before him — Derek standing at the foot of the bed, moonlight casting him half in shadow, half in silver light like something out of a Renaissance painting. The contrast emphasized every muscle, every plane of his body, made him look both human and divine. Ian's breath caught.

"Oh my god, Derek... you're incredible." The words came out without architecture, without any of the protective irony he might have reached for in a less stripped-down moment. Just the truth, plainly, the way you told the truth when you'd run out of everything else.

Derek's eyes softened, the confidence in his stance tempered by genuine emotion, by vulnerability that matched Ian's own. "I want to make you feel good, Ian."

Ian licked his lips, desire coursing through him like electricity through wire, like fire in his veins. He lay there in the half-dark of Derek's loft, eighteen years old and terrified and certain, trembling in a way he'd stopped trying to hide, and looked up at the person he'd loved from a distance for as long as he could remember loving anyone.

"Then *show* me," he said. "Show me *everything*."

His voice was steady. It had cost him something to make it steady. He meant every word.

Derek maintained unwavering eye contact as his hands moved to his belt buckle. The metallic sound of the clasp opening seemed unnaturally loud in the quiet loft, each click and clink magnified. With deliberate slowness that bordered on torturous — giving Ian time to object, to change his mind — Derek unfastened his jeans, sliding them down strong thighs to reveal blue briefs that contrasted beautifully with his tanned skin, that left little to the imagination.

Ian's gaze remained fixed on Derek, drinking in every detail like a man dying of thirst finally finding water. He was aware of staring. He was past the point of being able to do anything about it.

Derek hooked his thumbs in the elastic waistband of his underwear, pausing for a heartbeat — a final moment of hesitation, of giving Ian the chance to stop this, to say no.

When Ian nodded, his eyes dark with desire and trust, Derek slowly removed his briefs, exposing himself fully to Ian's gaze. His erection, freed from constraint, stood proud against his flat stomach — thick and flushed, the head glistening with a bead of moisture that caught the moonlight like liquid silver.

Ian's breath caught in his throat. Derek was magnificent — all hard muscle and smooth skin, from the defined ridges of his abdomen to the powerful columns of his thighs dusted with dark hair. The shadows played across the hollows of his hips, emphasizing the sharp cut of muscle leading downward like arrows. Ian's pulse thundered in his ears, each heartbeat sending blood rushing south so forcefully he was certain Derek must hear it even from across the room, must see it hammering against his ribs like a prisoner desperate for escape. He had imagined this. The imagination had not been remotely adequate. He filed that away as a general lesson about the limitations of imagination.

"Show me, Ian... Everything," Derek said, his voice barely above a whisper as he wrapped his hand around himself, stroking slowly in a display that was both erotic and vulnerable, showing Ian he wasn't alone in his desire.

The sight sent a surge of heat through Ian's body, made his mouth go dry and his own arousal almost painful. With new confidence born of Derek's obvious desire for him — confidence that arrived in the specific form of he wants this, he wants me, that is an established fact which was somehow the most stabilizing thought Ian had ever had — Ian positioned himself on his knees, never breaking eye contact. His heart hammered against his ribs as he slowly, teasingly slid down his boxer-briefs, revealing his own arousal to Derek's hungry gaze, feeling exposed and powerful all at once — exposed in a way that made every nerve ending in his body report for duty simultaneously, and powerful in a way he had absolutely no prior experience with and was inventing from scratch.

"Beautiful," Derek breathed, the word floating between them like a benediction, like a prayer. "You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, Ian Mitchell." His voice dropped lower, rougher with need. "Now, turn around... please."

The endearment made Ian's breath catch. Ian glanced up through his lashes, a mischievous smile playing on his lips — surprising himself with his own boldness, the way he'd been surprising himself all night, arriving at the edge of something and stepping off before he'd finished deciding to. He turned slowly, giving Derek a full view, feeling the weight of Derek's gaze like a physical caress — and feeling, underneath the boldness, the acute self-consciousness of someone who had never been looked at like this before and was learning, in real time, what it felt like to be seen.

Derek's sharp intake of breath was audible even from across the space between them. "Okay, I have to admit," he stammered, uncharacteristically lost for words, "I was not prepared for th-that."

The normally smooth-talking Derek Lawson, reduced to stuttering, gave Ian a heady sense of power, made him feel desirable in ways he'd never imagined — ways he had specifically, privately, feared he was not. "You like it?" he asked, glancing over his shoulder with newfound confidence — confidence that still had a slight tremor in it, like a note played true but on a string that was new and not yet fully settled.

Derek swallowed visibly, his gaze never leaving Ian's body, heated and hungry. "Oh, yes," he whispered hoarsely, "I love it. Now, lay down on your back..."

Ian complied, stretching out on the soft sheets that felt like silk against his bare skin, his fair skin almost luminescent in the moonlight filtering through the windows. Derek stood at the edge of the bed, his eyes traveling slowly over every inch of Ian's body with a mixture of raw desire and something that looked remarkably like reverence, like worship. Ian lay still beneath that gaze and let himself be seen — not performing stillness, but actually holding it, actually choosing not to cover himself or deflect with a joke or find some way to make the moment smaller and therefore safer. He chose to stay large in it. It was one of the harder things he'd done tonight, which was saying something.

Derek climbed onto the bed with feline grace, his movements predatory and purposeful. He positioned himself over Ian, their bodies aligned perfectly, and began a slow, torturous exploration with his lips and hands — mapping territory, claiming space, learning Ian's body with the dedication of a scholar. He kissed a path down Ian's neck, across his collarbones, down the center of his chest, tongue darting out to taste salt and skin and something uniquely Ian.

"You taste like sunshine," Derek murmured against his skin, the words both ridiculous and perfect. "Like summer and innocence and everything good."

Ian's responses — gasps, moans, whispered pleas — escaped him with a freedom that still half-surprised him each time, the sounds arriving before he could edit them, carrying more than he'd consciously chosen to give. He was past choosing. Something had opened and he had stopped trying to close it. When Derek's mouth found particularly sensitive spots, Ian's back arched involuntarily, his hands fisting in the sheets, seeking purchase as waves of sensation washed over him.

"I want to take my time with you," Derek murmured between kisses that traced patterns of fire across Ian's skin. "Learn every sound you make, every place that makes you shiver."

Ian nodded, wanting nothing more than to savor every moment, to memorize every sensation. He was memorizing. He was doing it deliberately and greedily, storing everything — the specific warmth of Derek's mouth, the weight of his hands, the sound of his voice at this register — because some part of him that was still seventeen and still cautious wanted to make sure that whatever happened next, whatever morning brought, he would have this. He would always have this.

As they began to move together in a smooth, sensual dance of exploration, Ian felt as though he were floating, untethered from everything but the sensation of Derek's body against his own, Derek's hands on his skin, Derek's breath mingling with his. This was what love felt like, he realized — this perfect fusion of desire and tenderness, of wanting and being wanted in return, of trust so complete you could surrender yourself entirely.

Their bodies moved in a rhythm as old as time itself, expressing without words what they were not yet ready to say aloud. Ian couldn't contain his sounds of pleasure as Derek's hands and lips discovered every sensitive spot on his body — places even Ian hadn't known could bring such exquisite sensation, nerve endings he didn't know existed sparking to life under Derek's attention.

And then something shifted in Ian — some last, careful door swinging open on quiet hinges. He had spent so long monitoring himself, editing himself, swallowing sounds before they could betray him. But here, in the amber dark of Derek's loft with the city glowing soft and gold beyond the windows, there was nothing left to hide. He let go.

The sounds that escaped him were unguarded and unashamed — soft gasps that climbed into something more urgent, broken syllables that weren't quite words, a low moan pulled from somewhere deep and involuntary that surprised even him with its honesty. He felt the vibration of it in his own chest, in his throat, as though his body were an

instrument finally being played in the key it was made for. He felt heat rush to his face, old instinct urging him to press his lips together, to take it back —

But Derek stilled, and Ian felt the change in him immediately. Not withdrawal. The opposite.

"There you are," Derek breathed, his voice rough at the edges in a way Ian had never heard before. He pulled back just enough to look at Ian's face, and what Ian saw in his expression wasn't amusement or satisfaction — it was something rawer than that. Wonder, almost. Reverence. "Let me hear you..."

And so Ian didn't stop. He let every sound come as it needed to come, surrendering to the sensation the way you surrender to deep water — not fighting it, not measuring it, simply letting it hold you. Derek's mouth found the curve of his neck and Ian felt the warmth of it radiate downward through his chest, pooling low and liquid in his belly. His fingers tightened instinctively in Derek's hair, and the small sound Derek made against his skin in response sent a fresh shiver cascading across every inch of him, goosebumps rising even in the heat.

Derek responded to every sound with renewed intention — hands that moved as though learning sheet music, finding the notes that made Ian's breath catch and returning to them with quiet deliberateness, cataloguing him. The rough warmth of Derek's palms against the small of his back. The precise, devastating pressure of his fingertips tracing the ridge of Ian's hip. The thin, soft, downy hairs on Derek's arms tickling his skin as Derek wrapped his strong arms around him. The softness of his lips against the sharp angle of Ian's collarbone, followed by the gentle scrape of his teeth that drew a sound from Ian so unguarded it hung in the amber air between them like something sacred.

Ian became acutely aware of everything at once — the cool of the rumpled sheets against the backs of his thighs, the faint smell of Derek's skin warmed by sleep and want, the distant moan of the city beyond the industrial windows, the soft hum of the jukebox in the corner that had played itself into silence hours ago but whose absence now felt like held breath. He was aware of the exact weight of Derek against him, the specific geography of him, the way their breathing had synchronized without either of them deciding to.

Every nerve ending Ian possessed had been redrawn, remapped, made new.

He heard himself make a sound he had no name for — something between a sigh and a surrender — and felt Derek smile against his skin in response, slow and private, like a secret kept just for this room.

Derek positioned himself between Ian's legs, their bodies fitting together as if designed as complementary pieces of some cosmic

puzzle. The feeling of Derek's arousal pressed against his own drew a guttural moan from Ian's throat, his hands running over the smooth skin and defined muscles of Derek's back with increasing urgency, nails digging in slightly.

"Please," Ian whispered, the word barely audible, torn from somewhere deep inside him. "Do it. Please... I'm all yours."

"So beautiful," Derek breathed against Ian's skin, his lips tracing a fiery path along the curve of Ian's neck, teeth scraping gently. With gentle but confident hands, he lifted Ian's legs, positioning them carefully as he knelt between them.

Derek's fingertips began a slow, deliberate journey, stroking from the top of Ian's thighs down to his knees with such delicate precision that Ian's breath caught in his throat. He savored every sensation — the callused pads of Derek's fingers, the gentleness of the touch, the reverence in the movement.

Lust flared hot and urgent through Ian's body as the thought struck him: this man could rip open a watermelon with his bare hands, could probably bend steel if he tried, yet in this moment, those big, strong, powerful hands were touching him like he was made of spun glass.

Derek stroked the other way now, fingertips gliding from knees to upper thighs and down again in a hypnotic rhythm. Ian's flesh broke out in goosebumps, a visible testimony to Derek's effect on him.

Derek giggled — actually giggled, the sound boyish and delighted. "Your body is so responsive to my touch."

Ian moaned, unable to contain the sound, and threw his head back against the pillow, completely surrendering to the sensations. "God, Derek..."

"You like when I touch you, baby?" Derek's voice was low, rough with desire, but tender too — genuinely wanting to know, to hear Ian say it.

"Oh, my God... Yes, Derek," Ian gasped, the words tumbling out breathless and needy.

Derek lifted Ian's legs onto his broad shoulders, their bodies now aligned in perfect intimacy, vulnerable and trusting. He thrust forward slowly, deliberately, and Ian felt the thick heat of Derek's cock slide between his cheeks, the sensation sending sparks of electricity up his spine. Derek thrust again, angling differently this time, and the tip found the spot it was looking for.

Ian closed his eyes, overwhelmed by the feeling of vulnerability and connection, by being so completely exposed and somehow completely safe. In Derek's arms, he felt truly seen and cherished for perhaps the first time in his life — not as Gavin's little brother, not as his parents' son, not as the good boy who never stepped out of line, but simply as Ian.

Just Ian.

Wholly himself.

"Ian, keep your eyes on me. I want you here with me. Present. Don't hide." Derek instructed softly, his voice gentle but commanding. Ian obeyed, gazing into Derek's crystal blue eyes that seemed to hold galaxies in their depths, entire universes of want and care.

Ian understood, and nodded.

"Are you ready for this?" Derek asked, his voice tender despite the raw desire evident in his expression, in the tension of his body hovering above Ian's.

Ian nodded, his throat tight with emotion. "I've been ready for this my whole life."

Derek's eyes darkened with unmistakable desire as he leaned down to claim Ian's lips in a kiss that contained both passion and promise, heat and tenderness. His lips brushed against Ian's ear, voice dropping to a husky whisper that sent shivers down Ian's spine.

"I'm going to make you feel so good, Ian. You might not be able to walk tomorrow."

The words were both a promise and a playful warning, sending shivers of anticipation down Ian's spine, making him laugh breathlessly — a real laugh, genuine and slightly disbelieving, the laugh of someone who had spent the entirety of this night being surprised by his own life.

Their tongues danced together in perfect harmony, feeding the flames of their shared desire. With a smile that held equal parts tenderness and wickedness, Derek reached toward the nightstand, the wooden drawer creaking slightly as he pulled it open. His fingers closed around a bottle of lubricant with practiced ease.

"Lucky I restocked," he quipped, bringing a moment of levity to the charged atmosphere, making Ian laugh and relaxing some of the tension — and Ian was grateful for the laugh, grabbed onto it with both hands, because his heart was doing the medically concerning thing again and the laugh gave it somewhere to go.

Ian's laugh turned into a gasp as Derek clicked open the lid and warmed the gel between his fingers before applying it with gentle thoroughness.

The sensation was foreign but not unwelcome — foreign in the specific way of something entirely outside the boundaries of Ian's experience, which he was discovering tonight had been considerably more limited than he'd understood — especially with Derek's eyes locked on his face, watching for any sign of discomfort, of pain, ready to stop at the first indication Ian needed him to.

Positioned face to face, their bodies tantalizingly close, Derek entered him with painstaking slowness, his eyes never leaving Ian's face. The feeling was unlike anything Ian had ever experienced — a

fullness, a connection that transcended the physical, that felt like coming home and being reborn all at once.

Ian let out a low moan, and Derek immediately stilled, concern etched into his handsome features despite his own obvious need.

"Are you alright?" he asked softly, his voice strained with the effort of restraint, holding back when his body demanded he move.

Ian bit his bottom lip as his body adjusted to the new sensation. His immediate instinct was to pull away, to say stop — the old reflex, the one that had governed most of his life, the one that said this is too much, retreat to something smaller and safer — but when he looked into Derek's eyes and saw the care there, along with unmistakable desire, with want tempered by concern, he wanted nothing more than to continue, to experience all of this with Derek.

"Relax," Derek whispered, his free hand stroking Ian's hair with infinite gentleness. "Relax, and just breathe."

Ian nodded, his breath coming in shallow gasps, trying to obey — trying in the way you try to do something your body has no prior instruction for, the way you try to relax when someone tells you to relax, which under ordinary circumstances was entirely ineffective but with Derek's hand in his hair was, improbably, working.

"Just breathe," Derek repeated, his own chest rising and falling rapidly, his body trembling with the effort of staying still.

Ian took a deep, deliberate breath and released it slowly, feeling his body gradually relax and accommodate Derek. As the initial discomfort faded — stretching into something else, something deeper — it was replaced by a building pleasure that took him by surprise, that made his eyes widen with wonder. He hadn't expected the wonder. He had expected many things and had been wrong about most of them.

"You feel so good," Ian murmured, his eyes wide with wonder and discovery. "It's so big. So much... in the best way." His teeth worried his bottom lip again as his gaze locked with Derek's, vulnerable and trusting — more vulnerable than he'd been all night, more trusting than he'd known he was capable of being.

Derek's smile returned, transforming his face from strained to radiant. "That lip biting will be the death of me," he groaned, his hips twitching involuntarily. His expression grew serious again. "If you feel any pain, tell me immediately, and I'll stop. No matter what, I promise. You're very, very safe."

Ian nodded, and slowly, Derek began to move.

Their bodies found a rhythm together, gliding against each other in a dance as old as humanity itself, ancient and new all at once. Ian's eyes fluttered closed as waves of sensation washed over him, his body arching and moving beneath Derek's as if they'd been lovers for years rather than minutes, as if they'd done this a thousand times before — and somewhere underneath the pleasure, the distant astonishment

of a boy who had been invisible to himself for so long, finally being found.

The steady rhythm gradually quickened, becoming more urgent as their desire built toward its inevitable crescendo. Each thrust brought them closer to that elusive peak, their hearts racing in tandem, their breaths becoming more ragged with each passing moment, with each slide of skin against skin.

Derek's breathing grew harsh and irregular, his face a mask of ecstasy as he moved. His eyes, dark with passion, remained fixed on Ian's face, watching each expression of pleasure with obvious delight, memorizing every gasp and moan.

Ian's throat vibrated with sounds that shocked even himself — raw, animal moans that tore from somewhere primal within him, each one punctuated by Derek's answering growls of approval. His hips buckled upward helplessly as Derek hit a spot that made his vision blur, his toes curl, his back arch off the bed. Sweat slicked their bodies as they moved together, the wet sounds of their coupling filling the room alongside their shared panting. Ian's entire body trembled on the precipice of release, muscles clenching, heat pooling low and insistent in his core.

Perry's earlier joke about seeing fireworks when Derek kissed Ian on the dancefloor didn't seem so far-fetched now. With Derek's powerful body moving against his, Ian could indeed see sparks behind his closed eyelids, could see stars exploding in constellations of pleasure. The heat between them was palpable, sending shivers of delight through his entire being. A drop of sweat fell from Derek's forehead onto Ian's face, slipping past his parted lips — a strangely intimate connection that only heightened the moment, making it more real, more visceral.

Derek's hands gripped Ian's hips firmly, pulling him closer with each thrust, their bodies meeting and parting in perfect rhythm. The sensations built to an almost unbearable intensity, and Ian felt himself teetering on the edge of something monumental, something that would change him forever.

"Don't stop," he breathed, the words more plea than command, desperate and honest.

Derek responded with a noise that was almost a growl, primal and possessive, driving into Ian with renewed vigor.

"Couldn't if I tried," he panted, his voice rough with exertion and desire, with need so intense it bordered on pain.

"Harder," Ian requested, surprising himself with his boldness, with his ability to ask for what he wanted — this continuing pattern of his mouth arriving somewhere brave before his brain had finished the paperwork. He gazed up at Derek, no longer the shy boy he'd been mere hours ago — or rather, still that boy, that boy still entirely present

underneath all of this, but with something new layered over him, something that had been there all along waiting for exactly this night to become visible. "Please."

Derek's eyes flashed with primal hunger as he adjusted their position, lifting Ian's leg for deeper access. Sweat glistened on his chest and arms as he moved with increasing urgency, driving them both toward culmination, toward the peak they'd been climbing.

"Look at me," Derek commanded, his voice thick with desire and raw with need. His eyes, the color of a storm-tossed ocean, fixed on Ian's with possessive intensity. With each powerful thrust, he claimed Ian as his own, their bodies moving together in a primal dance of pure passion.

Ian obeyed, meeting Derek's heated gaze as his own eyes darkened with unbridled desire. The eye contact between them created an emotional intimacy that matched the physical, and the combination proved overwhelming. With a cry that seemed torn from the depths of his soul, Ian reached his climax, his entire being consumed by pleasure that spilled over his stomach in pulsing waves, stars exploding behind his eyes.

As Ian's body clenched around him in rhythmic waves, Derek's vision blurred at the edges. The slick heat gripping him, the salt-sweet taste of Ian's skin still on his tongue, the breathless whimpers escaping those bitten lips — it all converged into a symphony of sensation that shattered his legendary restraint. His hips stuttered forward of their own accord, desperate to bury himself impossibly deeper.

Derek felt himself surging toward his own release, his heart hammering against his ribs, his breath coming in harsh, uneven gasps. Unable to resist the temptation, he leaned down to capture Ian's lips in a desperate, consuming kiss. He held Ian tightly against him, their bodies moving in perfect synchronicity, their hearts racing in tandem.

With a sound somewhere between a groan and a shout, Derek reached his own climax, his body shuddering as he emptied himself inside Ian. For several heartbeats, he remained perfectly still, suspended in the perfect moment of completion, before collapsing onto Ian, their sweat-slicked bodies pressed together as they struggled to regain their breath.

The sound of their ragged breathing filled the quiet room as Derek sighed against Ian's neck, his body still trembling with aftershocks of pleasure.

"You are mine now," he whispered, his voice low and possessive but tinged with wonder, with disbelief that this was real.

"I am yours," Ian affirmed, his fingers gently combing through Derek's damp hair, the strands soft between his fingers. The simple declaration felt more binding than any formal vow could have been, more sacred than any ceremony. He said it and meant it completely and

felt, in the saying of it, the full impossible distance between this moment and this morning — between the boy who had stood in front of his mirror deciding what to wear and had no idea, had genuinely no idea, what the day was going to do to him.

They remained entwined for what seemed like hours, limbs tangled together, bodies radiating heat into the vast expanse of Derek's loft. The only sounds were their gradually slowing breaths and the distant city noises filtering through the windows — a siren wailing, a car horn, someone's laughter echoing up from the street below, the ordinary music of a world that had continued spinning through all of this, indifferent and unchanged, while Ian had been entirely remade.

Eventually, Derek rolled off Ian and swung his legs over the side of the bed in one fluid movement. The moonlight played across his back, highlighting the definition of muscle and the elegant line of his spine, the sweat cooling on his skin.

Panic flared in Ian's chest, sudden and sharp — the old fear arriving right on schedule, the one that had been waiting patiently through all the bravery, biding its time. The voice that said too good, too much, here comes the part where it ends.

"Where are you going?" he asked, unable to keep the fear from his voice, vulnerability making it shake — making him sound, he registered with a distant wince, exactly as young as he was. All the evening's accumulated confidence evaporating in a single second, leaving behind the boy who had been afraid of wanting this, afraid of losing this, afraid that wanting things was the surest way to lose them.

Was this it?

Was Derek already regretting what they'd done?

Was Ian about to be dismissed, sent home like this had been a mistake?

Derek turned back, his expression softening as he read the anxiety on Ian's face, as he recognized the fear there — and Ian watched him read it, watched him understand it, and felt simultaneously relieved and embarrassed to be so transparent, to be so thoroughly eighteen in this particular moment. Derek leaned over to place a tender kiss on Ian's forehead, lingering there.

"Hey... Don't worry," he murmured, his breath warm against Ian's skin. "I'll be right back. Don't move a muscle."

Ian watched Derek's naked form move through the shadows of the loft, the sound of cupboard doors and running water reaching his ears — domestic sounds that were somehow comforting, that suggested this wasn't ending, that Derek was caring for him. He exhaled slowly, releasing the breath he'd been holding, the panic retreating as quietly as it had arrived, leaving him slightly sheepish about its appearance and deeply grateful for Derek's response to it. He stared at the ceiling and let his heartbeat slow.

After a few moments, Derek returned with a damp washcloth, his body silhouetted against the city lights behind him like a Greek god descended to earth.

He climbed back onto the bed beside Ian and, with unexpected tenderness that made Ian's throat tight, cleaned the evidence of their passion from Ian's stomach and chest. Each gentle stroke of the cloth sent aftershocks of pleasure through Ian's sensitized skin, reminded him of what they'd just shared — and each stroke also felt like something else, something beyond physical, like being tended to, like being the kind of person someone bothered to care for after. Ian had not known to want this specific thing. He recognized now that he had always needed it.

Ian tilted his head to meet Derek's gaze, finding not the cockiness he'd expected from stories Gavin had told, but sincere tenderness that made his heart constrict.

"I'm more than alright," he replied softly. "I'm perfect."

Derek's eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled, soft and genuine.

"You are my perfect."

He leaned down to place a chaste kiss on Ian's forehead, the simple gesture somehow more intimate than everything that had come before, more meaningful.

"You did really well," Derek said, his voice reassuring but tinged with something like pride, like satisfaction. "Did I hurt you at all?"

"Not at all," Ian replied honestly, meaning it. "It felt... incredible, actually."

"That's all I wanted to hear." Derek's fingers tugged playfully at Ian's hair, the gentle pull sending shivers down his spine. "Well, that and all those pretty sounds you make."

Ian felt his face heat, embarrassment flooding through him. "I had no idea I would be so... vocal."

"Trust me," Derek said with a wicked grin, "I'm not complaining. Not even a little bit."

As Ian nestled closer to Derek's warmth, a whirlwind of emotions swept through him — elation, vulnerability, and a sense of profound change. Was this what becoming an adult truly meant? Not the arbitrary milestone of a birthday, but this willing opening of oneself to another person? As Ian relaxed, he felt every point of contact between his skin and Derek's with heightened awareness, as if his body had been merely going through the motions all these years and was now, finally, gloriously awake.

In the early hours of the morning, the silence of Derek's loft was broken by the soft sound of a record being selected on the jukebox.

The needle dropped gently onto vinyl, releasing the smooth, melancholic tones of "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes" by The Platters into the air.

Ian and Derek lay tangled in rumpled sheets, Ian's head pillowed on Derek's chest, listening to his gradually slowing heartbeat. Derek traced lazy patterns on Ian's back, his fingertips leaving trails of goosebumps in their wake.

"I never thought I could have this," Ian said quietly, his voice barely audible over the music.

Derek tilted Ian's chin up with gentle fingers, meeting his gaze. "Have what?"

"This. You. A first time that felt..." Ian paused, searching for the right word. "Sacred." His cheeks flushed, but he held Derek's gaze steadily. "I was so scared, for so long. Of who I was. Of never finding someone who'd look at me the way you do."

Derek's thumb brushed Ian's cheekbone, his eyes glistening with emotion in the dim light. As the lyrics of the song washed over them, his expression grew thoughtful.

"They said someday you'll find, all who love are blind..." Derek sang softly along with the record, his voice melodic and rich, carrying notes of longing and bittersweetness.

"I've missed hearing you sing," Ian murmured, remembering family gatherings where Derek would sing along to the radio, remembering being eight years old and thinking Derek could do literally everything and do it better than anyone. "That voice is criminal."

Derek chuckled, the sound rumbling pleasantly against Ian's ear. "One of my many hidden talents," he quipped before growing serious again. "The song is beautiful, isn't it? But also..."

"A little sad?" Ian finished for him.

Derek nodded, his expression pensive. "It's about the pain of lost love, and how we can be blind when we first fall. How we might not see the challenges ahead."

Ian felt a flicker of unease curl in his stomach. "Do you think that's us? Are we being blind?"

Derek was quiet for a long moment, considering the weight of the question.

"Maybe," he finally admitted, his honesty both painful and appreciated. "There's a lot stacked against us — your family, the age difference, the timing with Gavin's wedding. But Ian..." He paused, his gaze intensifying. "I'd rather be blind with you than see clearly with anyone else."

Ian's heart swelled at Derek's words, a lump forming in his throat. He leaned up, kissing Derek deeply as the song continued to play, its melancholy beauty surrounding them like a cocoon. He pushed the

unease down. He was good at pushing things down. He'd had seventeen years of practice.

As they parted, Derek smiled softly. "You know, my parents used to dance to this song. It's been a favorite of mine for years."

"Really?" Ian asked, intrigued by this glimpse into a past Derek rarely discussed, into the family he'd lost. This was new territory — Derek offering something unguarded, something that hadn't come up in nineteen years of Gavin's stories. Ian filed it carefully, turning it over with the particular reverence of someone receiving a gift they hadn't expected.

Derek nodded. "Back when things were good between them. Before everything fell apart." He paused, his expression distant. "I used to watch them from the stairs, late at night when they thought I was asleep. My dad would pull my mom close, and they'd sway together in the living room. It looked like magic to me then."

Ian pressed a kiss to Derek's chest, right over his heart. "Thank you for sharing that with me." He meant it more than the words could carry — meant it as I know this cost you something, and I won't waste it.

Ian pressed another kiss to Derek's chest before resting his head on it once more. The steady thump of Derek's heartbeat beneath his ear was comforting in its constancy. After a moment of companionable silence, Derek spoke again, his tone more serious.

"Ian, I know you said you didn't want to talk about them, but have you thought about how you'll discuss this with your parents and brother? Coming out can be really difficult, especially with the wedding so soon. I don't want to add more stress for you."

Ian sighed, his fingers tracing idle patterns on Derek's skin. "I'm terrified of how they'll react, to be honest."

"Me too," Derek confessed, anxiety evident in his voice. "I feel like they're going to think I am some sort of sexual deviant who preys on teenage boys..." He groaned theatrically, throwing an arm across his eyes. "Your dad's going to chase me down the street with a pitchfork, isn't he? I'll be the talk of Grosse Pointe — Oh god, I can see the headlines now: 'Local Heartthrob Flees Angry Mob, Claims It's All a Big Misunderstanding.'"

Ian couldn't help but laugh at the absurd mental image. "I hope that's not their first impression, but honestly, I don't know how it's going to go down. I just want to be true to myself."

Derek's expression sobered as he gently tilted Ian's chin up to meet his gaze. "I'm not... you know?" he said, his voice tinged with genuine concern. "I'm not a sexual predator or anything like that. I never even looked at you that way until I saw you on the dance floor at Menjo's. I said to myself: 'Who is that sexy blonde, and how can I get his attention?' And then you ran right into me."

They both chuckled at the memory, the tension easing. "It was the single most romantic moment of my life," Ian admitted, "until... well, until you picked me up and carried me to your bed."

Derek winked, some of his customary confidence returning. "I knew you'd like that..."

"Let's enjoy this as much as we can," Ian suggested, trying to push thoughts of the inevitable confrontation away. "Get through the wedding, and then we'll decide what to do next."

"Sounds good to me," Derek agreed, though they both knew it wouldn't be that simple.

Ian hesitated, then voiced the question that had been nagging at him since Chris's confrontation — the one he'd been carrying through the rest of the night like a stone in a pocket, aware of its weight even when he wasn't thinking about it directly. "Are you going to tell me what Chris meant? About you breaking hearts, and everything going to shit?"

Derek sighed, a shadow passing over his face. His fingers continued their gentle exploration of Ian's skin, but his body tensed almost imperceptibly — a change Ian registered with a sensitivity he hadn't possessed this morning, a new fluency in the language of Derek's body.

"I wish I could say I wasn't at fault, Ian, but that would be a lie," Derek began, his voice low and tinged with regret. "You see, way back in our college days, your brother Gavin met Chris in one of his classes. Chris was dating Blake at the time. Gavin introduced me to them..."

"I see," Ian said quietly, pieces falling into place. Something small and cold settled in his chest as they did — not quite dread, not quite disappointment, something in between that he didn't have a name for yet. "Your ex-boyfriend, Blake Summers. Did Blake cheat on Chris with you?"

Derek nodded, his eyes darkening with remorse.

"We were young and foolish, and we let our emotions override our better judgment. I had no right to come between them." His voice dropped even lower. "I was so blinded by my lust for Blake that I didn't consider the damage I was causing. It's something I still carry with me — the knowledge that I participated in something I would never want done to me."

Ian absorbed this in silence, his fingers going still against Derek's skin. He had imagined many versions of Derek's romantic history over the years — had constructed them from fragments of overheard conversations and the general mythology of someone Gavin admired without reservation — but they had all, he realized now, been versions that preserved Derek's essential goodness. This was something

else. This was Derek having done a genuinely unkind thing. Having chosen wrong, not out of naivety but out of want. Having hurt someone.

Ian was aware of the adjustment happening in his chest, quiet and necessary, like a bone setting itself. The Derek on the pedestal — the Derek who had been perfect from a careful distance — did not do things like this. The Derek lying beside him, warm and real and smelling of sandalwood and sex, apparently did. Had. The distance between those two versions was not enormous. It was not insurmountable. But it was real, and Ian felt it.

"Does that change how you feel about me?" Derek asked, vulnerability evident in his question — and Ian heard something in it that he hadn't heard before: the specific vulnerability of someone who has been holding a thing in for a long time and is now watching the other person's face to see what it means for them.

Ian was quiet for a beat longer than he'd intended. Not performing hesitation — actually hesitating, actually letting the question sit with its full weight for a moment before answering. "No, Derek," he replied, and meant it. "Nobody's perfect. Not even the Great Derek Lawson." He attempted a smile to soften his words, but it carried something more complicated than humor underneath. "It happened years ago. We all make mistakes. What matters now is what we do with the present and the future."

He said it and believed it. He also felt, beneath the believing, the quiet shock of being eighteen and discovering for the first time that the person you had loved from a distance had actual dimensions — had shadow as well as light, had made choices you wouldn't have made, had been someone you might not have recognized if you'd met him then instead of now. It wasn't devastating. It was just real. And real, Ian was learning tonight, had a specific weight that the imagined version never did.

"I could sit here and say that it was all Blake — that he seduced me, and I was just an innocent victim of circumstance. But that would be dishonest." Derek's sincerity was evident even in the dim light. "Karma came back around, though. You've heard how terrible that relationship became and how badly it ended."

"Yes... He put you through hell," Ian acknowledged, remembering fragments of overheard conversations between Gavin and their parents — fragments he'd hoarded then without knowing why, storing them away in the same private place where he kept everything that had Derek's name on it. He hesitated before asking the question that had been lingering in his mind, the one he both wanted and did not entirely want answered. "Did you... love him?"

Derek inhaled deeply, as if gathering courage to confront his past. "I thought I did. At the time, I confused intensity with love, obsession with devotion. I was so caught up in the idea of being with

someone — anyone — that I didn't recognize the toll it was taking on both of us. In the end... he hurt me. Repeatedly. And I let him, because I thought that's what I deserved."

Ian felt the ache of that settle somewhere between his ribs. The Derek who thought he deserved to be hurt was harder to hold than the Derek who had done the hurting — smaller, more tender, more in need of something Ian desperately wanted to give him. He pressed his lips together and let the feeling move through him without rushing past it.

"I'm sorry," Ian said simply, his heart aching for the younger Derek who had endured such pain.

"It's okay," Derek assured him, his fingers continuing their gentle caress of Ian's skin. "We all make mistakes. And I'd like to think I've learned from mine."

Derek shifted slightly, propping himself up on an elbow to face Ian more directly. "I wish I could say my romantic history was uncomplicated, Ian, but the truth is... it's been a bit of a disaster zone."

Ian mirrored Derek's position, giving him his full attention. "I'm listening," he said softly, without judgment — and meant the without judgment sincerely, even as some younger, more protected part of him quietly braced for what came next, the way you brace before a door opens when you're not sure what's on the other side.

Derek took another deep breath. "Well, you know about Chris and Blake now. That... that was my first real taste of how messy love can be. I was so caught up in my feelings for Blake that I never considered the consequences. I hurt Chris, betrayed his trust, and started my relationship with Blake on a foundation of deception."

He paused, his gaze distant with memories. "Blake and I... God, it was intense. At first, it felt like everything I'd ever wanted. But as time went on, things turned toxic. He was manipulative, constantly pushing my boundaries. I lost myself in that relationship, forgot who I was outside of being Blake's boyfriend."

Ian reached out, squeezing Derek's hand encouragingly — and felt, as he did it, the strange doubling of the moment: the Ian who loved Derek reaching out, and the Ian who was eighteen and had never done any of this before, learning in real time that the people you loved came with entire histories you hadn't been part of, hadn't been there to witness, couldn't retroactively change or protect them from.

"Before and after Blake, there were others," Derek continued, his voice steady but tinged with melancholy. "But I always fell into the same destructive patterns. I'd choose guys who were unavailable — emotionally or otherwise. I think a part of me didn't believe I deserved better."

Ian absorbed this carefully. He was doing a kind of quiet accounting, he realized — not calculating whether Derek was worth it, because he had already decided that and meant it, but simply

cataloguing the distance between who he had imagined Derek to be and who Derek actually was. The imagined Derek had been somewhat frictionless, had moved through the world with an ease that had seemed effortless because Ian had never seen the cost of it. The real Derek had paid for things. Had made bad choices and lived inside the consequences. Had lost himself in someone and found his way back slowly and with professional help. This was more complicated than the myth. It was also, Ian suspected, more worth knowing.

"But you do deserve better," Ian interjected with quiet conviction — and was aware, even as he said it, that he was speaking to the Derek who had believed otherwise, trying to reach him across the years and the damage and the bad choices with something that was true and insufficient and the best he had.

Derek's expression softened, his eyes warming as they met Ian's. "I know that now. It took a lot of therapy and some painful self-examination to get here. I had to learn how to set boundaries, how to communicate honestly. I had to figure out what I truly wanted in a partner, not just what I thought I should want."

He sat up straighter, his gaze intensifying. "That's why this — us — it's so important to me, Ian. I want to do things differently this time. I want to be open and honest, to take things at a pace that feels right for both of us. I want to build something real, something based on mutual respect and genuine connection."

Ian nodded, absorbing Derek's words. They landed differently than they would have an hour ago, before the confession — were weightier now, more earned, because Ian understood they weren't the words of someone for whom things had always been easy. They were the words of someone who had learned them the hard way and was now choosing to apply them deliberately. That meant something. It meant more, actually, than the effortless perfection he'd been worshipping from the other side of the room for years.

"I appreciate your honesty," he said sincerely. Then, more hesitantly — because the question had been sitting at the back of his throat since Derek first began and he had been deciding whether to ask it, whether he was ready to hear the answer: "But... does it worry you? Being with someone so... inexperienced compared to you?"

Derek reached out to cup Ian's face gently. "It doesn't worry me, Ian. If anything, it makes me want to be even more careful, more thoughtful. I don't want to rush you or pressure you into anything. I want us to discover this together, at our own pace." He leaned closer, resting his forehead against Ian's. "I've made plenty of mistakes in love, Ian. But they've all led me here, to you. And I promise, I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure this is different. Better. Because you deserve that. We both do."

Ian felt warmth spread through his chest at Derek's words, genuine and spreading like sunlight — and also, in the same moment, the clear-eyed awareness that this was a real person making a real promise with a real history of not always keeping them. Not because he was dishonest. Because he was human. Because love was something people attempted rather than achieved, and sometimes the attempt failed and left damage, and Derek knew that better than Ian did, had the scars to prove it, and was choosing to try again anyway.

That, Ian thought, was not the myth. The myth didn't have scars. The myth didn't go to therapy or lose itself in someone toxic or make choices it regretted. But this — this person, with his complicated history and his genuine tenderness and the shadow that moved across his face when he talked about Blake — this was something you could actually love. Not from a distance, from behind a carefully maintained wall of idealization, but up close. Messily. With full knowledge of the gaps between expectation and reality.

Ian was eighteen years old and had been in love with a version of Derek Lawson for as long as he could remember. He was beginning to understand that tonight he had met a different one. The real one. And the real one, improbable as it seemed, was better.

"There are still so many unknowns," Ian said quietly, almost to himself. "So many potential obstacles ahead." He felt them, all of them, arranged in the near distance like weather on the horizon. Gavin. His parents. The wedding. The age difference. The history that preceded him and would continue to have weight regardless of what he wanted it to do.

But in that moment, hearing the sincerity in Derek's voice and seeing the vulnerability in his eyes — the real vulnerability, not the myth's effortless confidence but the careful, hard-won openness of someone who had learned that honesty was worth the cost — Ian felt a sense of hope and possibility unlike anything he'd experienced before. Not the naïve hope of the boy who had idolized Derek from the stairs at Christmas. Something more grounded than that, more honest, with its eyes open.

As they lay entwined, the soft strains of another record now playing in the background, Ian couldn't help but respond to the renewed desire building between them.

He shifted, moving to straddle Derek's hips in a bold move that surprised them both — bold in the way that things were bold after confession, after the ground had shifted and you were still standing, bold with the particular confidence of someone who had just seen the worst of the worst and decided it wasn't disqualifying.

Derek moaned appreciatively, his hands coming to rest on Ian's thighs. "Well, hello there," he murmured, a playful glint returning to his eyes.

"You're a good man, Derek Lawson," Ian said softly, meaning it — meaning it differently than he would have meant it an hour ago, meaning it not as the conclusion of an idealized biography but as a considered judgment made with incomplete information and full intention, the way adults meant things when they chose to mean them anyway. "Not a perfect one. But a good one."

Derek looked at him for a moment with something in his expression that Ian couldn't entirely name — surprise, maybe, or recognition, or the specific emotion of being seen accurately by someone and finding it bearable.

"If you're gonna sit like that, you better be prepared for the consequences, Mitchell," Derek warned, his voice husky with renewed desire, his hands tightening on Ian's thighs possessively.

"Oh, I'm more than ready, Lawson," Ian replied with newfound confidence, with boldness born from pleasure already experienced, from knowing what awaited him — and also, underneath the boldness, from the newer and quieter thing: the confidence of someone who had looked at the real version of what he wanted and chosen it deliberately, eyes open, full knowledge. "The question is, are you?"

"Oh, yes. I am beyond ready for more of you," Derek said, his smile promising delicious retribution, eyes darkening with intent. "Let's not waste any more time."

With a move that displayed both strength and grace — effortless in a way that made Ian's breath catch — Derek flipped their positions, rolling Ian onto his back and settling above him with predatory satisfaction. Their bodies aligned perfectly, as if designed as complementary pieces of a cosmic puzzle, fitting together in ways that defied coincidence.

The room soon filled with the passionate sounds of their lovemaking, accompanied by the soft background music from the jukebox — a romantic soundtrack to their intimate reunion, Etta James crooning about love and longing.

As they lost themselves in each other once more, everything beyond the boundaries of the bed ceased to exist. There was only this — the two of them, connected in the most primal and yet most tender of ways, bodies moving in perfect synchronicity. The moonlight continued its silent vigil, bathing their entwined forms in silver radiance as they moved together in perfect harmony, as the city slept around them and they created their own universe.

And Ian, for the first time, was not loving a myth. He was loving a man. The difference, he was discovering, was everything.

This time was different—less urgent, more exploratory. Derek took his time, savoring every gasp and moan Ian offered, learning what made him arch his back, what made his nails dig into Derek's shoulders, what made his eyes roll back in ecstasy. Ian, emboldened by familiarity,

touched Derek with more confidence, mapped his body with more certainty, whispered demands rather than requests.

When they finally collapsed together again, spent and satisfied, the sky outside had begun to lighten—not quite dawn, but no longer the deep velvet of true night. That in-between time when the world held its breath before waking.

Later, as Ian drifted toward sleep, Derek watched him with undisguised wonder, his heart so full it ached. He released a contented sigh, feeling the accumulated tensions of the day finally dissipating like smoke on wind.

The gentle moonlight—now competing with the first hints of approaching dawn—filtered through the window, casting both men in a soft, ethereal glow that made them look like something out of a painting, like art rather than life.

Derek's loft, his sanctuary, had always reminded him of Superman's Fortress of Solitude—a place where he could retreat from the world and its expectations, from the performance of being Derek Lawson. Like Clark Kent removing his glasses and cape, here Derek could shed the facade of perfection he maintained for others—the charm, the confidence, the easy smile that hid so much. But with Ian beside him, the space had transformed from a solitary refuge to something warmer, more complete. No longer a fortress but a home. No longer isolation but connection.

Ian stirred, his lashes fluttering as he emerged from the shallow waters of sleep. His blond hair was charmingly disheveled, sticking up in various directions like a dandelion gone to seed, and Derek couldn't help but smile at how effortlessly beautiful he looked in this unguarded state. Not the carefully groomed boy from family dinners, but raw and real and thoroughly debauched.

"What are you thinking about, Superman?" Ian asked, his voice rough with sleep as he snuggled closer to Derek's warmth, pressing his face against Derek's chest.

Derek turned, surprised and touched by the nickname, by Ian's ability to see through him. "About how with you, I can just be me. I don't have to be super-anything."

"You're always perfect to me, Derek," Ian murmured, his eyes soft with affection, with post-coital tenderness. "But I also know that behind that perfection is a flawed Clark Kent who is just as wonderful—maybe even more so."

Derek tightened his arms around Ian, overwhelmed by the simple acceptance in those words, by being seen so completely and still wanted. In this moment, with the city sleeping beyond the windows and Ian warm in his arms, nothing else mattered. They were just two

imperfect beings, finding something remarkably close to perfection in each other's embrace.

As Ian drifted back into slumber, Derek couldn't help but wonder if this remarkable young man could handle the insecurities and doubts that plagued him beneath his confident exterior—the fear of abandonment, the certainty that he didn't deserve good things, the belief that everyone eventually left. But for now, in this stolen moment of peace, they were two hearts beating in synchronicity, two souls finding harbor in each other after long and separate journeys through loneliness.

Before the first pale fingers of dawn could breach the horizon, Ian kissed Derek tenderly, his heart overflowing with gratitude for this man who had so unexpectedly become the center of his world, who had shown him pleasure and care and what it meant to be wanted.

He then succumbed to the deepest and most restful sleep he had experienced in years, nestled in the protective circle of Derek's strong arms. The rhythmic rise and fall of Derek's chest created a soothing cadence that lulled Ian into complete tranquility, a metronome of safety and peace. For this precious moment, suspended between night and morning, he felt truly at peace, sheltered from the uncertainties that awaited beyond these walls, beyond this bed, beyond this perfect bubble of intimacy.

Derek remained awake, his fingers absently tracing invisible patterns on Ian's skin—circles and spirals, constellations and labyrinths—as the younger man slept peacefully beside him. His mind raced with conflicting emotions that threatened to overwhelm his usually ordered thoughts, that crashed against each other like waves in a storm.

God, what am I doing?

The question echoed in his skull, accusatory and relentless.

This is Ian.

Little Ian Mitchell. Gavin's baby brother.

The kid I've known since he was practically in diapers, who used to follow us around asking to play basketball, who Gavin would shoo away so we could have "guy time."

But... he's not a kid anymore, is he?

Derek's gaze traveled over Ian's sleeping form—the strong line of his shoulder, the subtle definition of muscle beneath fair skin that spoke of recent growth, the elegant curve of his jaw that had lost its boyish softness.

No, definitely not a kid anymore.

When had that transformation occurred?

When did the shy boy who used to trail after Gavin turned into this confident, beautiful young man who looked at me like I hung the moon, who'd given himself so completely, so trustingly?

A wave of exhilaration washed over Derek, making his heart beat faster, making his skin feel too tight for his body.

I've never felt like this before. Like every nerve ending is alive, like I'm experiencing color for the first time after living in grayscale.

Is this what it's supposed to feel like?

To want someone so much it physically aches? To feel like you'd do anything—risk anything—just to keep them close?

But excitement quickly gave way to fear, cold and sharp in his chest like a blade of ice.

What if I'm taking advantage of him?

What if he wakes up regretting everything?

What if in the harsh light of day, he realizes this was a mistake, that I pushed him too far, too fast?

Christ, what will Gavin say?

What will the Mitchells think?

They've been more family to me than my own parents ever were. They welcomed me into their home, fed me, treated me like a son. And I repay them by fucking their middle child?

Derek closed his eyes, struggling to regulate his breathing, to calm the panic rising in his throat.

I could lose everything. My best friend, the only real family I've known since my parents died. Is it worth risking all that? Is any relationship worth that kind of loss?

He opened his eyes again, his gaze falling on Ian's peaceful face, softened in sleep and looking younger, more vulnerable. The moonlight caught on his eyelashes, casting delicate shadows across his cheeks. He looked innocent despite what they'd done, despite the marks Derek could see on his neck where he'd kissed too hard, claimed too obviously.

Yes.

The answer came with surprising certainty, with conviction that cut through the doubt like light through darkness.

Yes, it's worth it. Because for the first time in my life, I feel... complete. Like I've found a part of myself I didn't even know was missing. Like all the broken pieces inside me have suddenly aligned into something whole.

Fear crept back, insidious and familiar, an old companion Derek knew too well.

But what if I mess this up?

What if I hurt him like I've hurt others?

Blake, Chris, all the ones whose names I've forgotten but whose faces still haunt me in quiet moments.

I couldn't bear to cause Ian pain. He deserves so much better than my complicated past and all my baggage, than someone who's already proven they're capable of betrayal and selfishness.

Derek gently brushed a strand of hair from Ian's forehead, his touch feather-light to avoid disturbing him, reverent as prayer.

I want to be better for you, Ian. I want to be the man you deserve—steady and sure and certain. But I'm terrified I'll fall back into old patterns, that I'll destroy this beautiful thing before it even has a chance to grow, that I'll prove Chris right and break your heart like I've broken others.

He sighed softly, carefully pulling Ian closer, aligning their bodies in a protective embrace, trying to shield Ian from the world and from himself.

Whatever happens, I promise I'll try.

I'll fight for this, for us. I'll be honest, even when it's hard.

I'll communicate, even when I want to run.

I'll stay, even when fear tells me to leave before I get left.

Because you're worth fighting for, Ian Mitchell.

You're worth becoming a better man for.

His final thought before sleep finally claimed him—exhaustion winning over anxiety—surprised him with its clarity and conviction, with hope he hadn't felt in years:

And for the first time in my life, I think I might be too.

Worth fighting for.

Worth saving.

Worth loving.

Outside, the city began to wake. Cars started their engines. Coffee makers gurgled to life. The sun prepared to breach the horizon and turn night to day. But inside Derek's loft, two men slept peacefully in each other's arms, sheltered for a few more precious hours from the complications awaiting them, from the choices they'd have to make and the consequences they'd have to face.

For now, they had this.

And for now, it was enough.

11 – Morning Pains

Ian stirred awake, his hand instinctively reaching across the rumpled sheets, seeking Derek's warmth. Finding only cool fabric beneath his fingertips, he blinked open his eyes, momentarily disoriented by the unfamiliar ceiling above him—exposed industrial ductwork painted matte black, so different from the plain white ceiling of his childhood bedroom. For a heartbeat, panic fluttered in his chest like a trapped bird—where was he? Then the events of the previous night cascaded through his memory like a waterfall, bringing heat to his cheeks and a smile to his lips that he couldn't have suppressed if he'd tried, that felt like it might split his face in two.

The sheets still carried traces of Derek's scent—sandalwood and citrus, mingled with something more primal and distinctly him, something musky and masculine that made Ian's heart perform a complicated gymnastics routine in his chest, made his stomach flip and his skin flush with remembered pleasure.

Morning light spilled through the tall windows, painting golden patterns across the tangled bedding and warming patches of Ian's bare skin.

Beyond the glass, Detroit was already awake—the distant symphony of car horns, early birds calling to each other, and the persistent rhythm of urban life continuing as if the universe hadn't fundamentally realigned overnight, as if Ian Mitchell hadn't been transformed from boy to man in this very bed.

He lay still for a moment, allowing the memories to wash over him in vivid detail, replaying them like a highlight reel he wanted to memorize frame by frame.

The pulsing lights at Menjo's, the electric sensation of dancing with Derek, the kiss that had ignited something irreversible between them.

And then...

Ian's breath caught as he remembered what followed. The gentle exploration, the passionate declarations, the overwhelming sense of connection that had surpassed every adolescent fantasy he'd ever harbored in the privacy of his locked bedroom.

A kaleidoscope of emotions swirled within him—joy that bordered on euphoria, disbelief that this wasn't just another elaborate dream from which he'd wake sticky and disappointed, nervousness about what came next, and beneath it all, a profound sense of contentment that settled in his bones like warmth after coming in from the cold.

He felt transformed, as if the events of the night had rewritten something essential in his DNA, and had unlocked sequences that had been dormant his entire life. More adult, more confident, yet

paradoxically more vulnerable than he'd ever allowed himself to be before.

Ian stretched his limbs experimentally, wincing slightly at the unfamiliar aches that made themselves known—his thighs protesting, his lower back tight, and particularly his bum-bum, which throbbed with a dull soreness that made him catch his breath. Rather than discomfort, these small twinges brought a secret thrill, tangible evidence that last night had been real, that he hadn't imagined the whole impossible thing.

He, Ian Mitchell—formerly just Gavin's awkward little brother, the kid who got tongue-tied around cute boys, the virgin who'd never even been kissed until twenty-four hours ago—had spent the night with Derek Lawson.

Derek Lawson took my virginity.

The thought alone sent a lightning bolt of giddy disbelief through his system, leaving his fingertips tingling, making him want to laugh out loud or maybe scream into a pillow. He pressed his face into Derek's pillow—the one that still smelled like him—and had to suppress a slightly hysterical giggle.

Derek. Lawson. Took. My. Virginity.

And oh God, it had been...

Ian's face burned as the memories flooded back in sensory detail.

The way Derek had touched him—confident but tender, experienced but attentive, knowing exactly what to do, where to touch, how hard to press. The way he'd prepared Ian so carefully, talked him through it, checked in constantly to make sure he was okay. The way it had felt when Derek finally entered him—that initial burn giving way to pressure, then fullness, then something else entirely. Something that made stars explode behind his eyelids, made sounds come out of his mouth he didn't recognize, made his entire body feel like it was lighting up from the inside.

How does anyone function after experiencing that? Ian wondered, staring up at the ceiling. *How do people just go to work and grocery shopping and act normal when sex exists?*

He'd heard people talk about first times being awkward, painful, disappointing. Quick fumbles in the dark with equally inexperienced partners, both parties having no idea what they were doing, ending with embarrassment and unsatisfying conclusions.

But Derek... Derek had known exactly what he was doing. Every touch had been deliberate, skilled, designed to maximize Ian's pleasure. The way he'd used his hands, his mouth, his entire body like an instrument played by a master musician. The way he'd found spots inside Ian that Ian hadn't known existed, made him feel things he'd never imagined were possible.

I am so incredibly lucky, Ian thought, a smile spreading across his face that felt almost dopey in its blissfulness. *My first time was with someone who actually knows what they're doing. Who made it perfect. Who made me feel...*

Beautiful. Desired. Cherished. Worshipped.

The words Derek had whispered in the heat of passion echoed in his mind: *"You're mine now."* And God help him, Ian wanted to be Derek's. Wanted to be claimed and kept and—

His body responded to the memories with enthusiastic interest, arousal stirring despite the soreness. Ian became acutely aware that he was naked under these sheets, that his skin was hypersensitive in ways it hadn't been yesterday, that every brush of fabric felt electric. He shifted slightly and winced as his tender backside reminded him of last night's activities, but even the discomfort was somehow... pleasant? A reminder of Derek inside him, of being filled and stretched and—

Oh no, Ian thought as his body continued to respond, as heat pooled low in his belly. *Oh no no no.*

He glanced toward the kitchen where he could hear Derek moving around, and the thought that immediately followed was:

I want to do it again. Right now. Immediately.

His face flamed with mortification.

What was wrong with him?

Normal people didn't have sex for the first time and then immediately want more, did they?

Wasn't there supposed to be a recovery period? A cooling-off phase? Some kind of... refractory... thing?

Derek's going to think I'm a sex maniac, Ian worried, even as his body very much wanted to march into that kitchen and drag Derek back to bed. *We just did it last night. Twice. And I'm already lying here thinking about round three. He's going to think I'm insatiable. Desperate. A total nymphomaniac.*

But God, the memories wouldn't stop.

The weight of Derek above him. The stretch and burn and pleasure. The sounds Derek had made—those deep groans that rumbled from his chest, (that huge, strong, manly chest) the way his breath had caught when Ian clenched around him. The way their bodies had moved together, finding a rhythm that felt ancient and new all at once.

Get a grip, Mitchell, Ian lectured himself sternly, even as his body had other ideas. *You can't just jump him the second you see him. Play it cool. Be casual. Don't let him know you spent the last five minutes fantasizing about him bending you over the kitchen counter—*

He cut that thought off with a strangled noise, pressing his face into the pillow again.

Maybe I am a sex maniac, he thought with a mixture of horror and giddy excitement. Maybe Derek awakened something in me. Like opening Pandora's box, except the box is my libido and now it can't be closed.

The mental image made him snort with laughter despite himself.

Is this normal? Do other people feel like this after their first time? Or have I somehow broken myself? Like, did Derek's... expertise... permanently rewire my brain?

Is this what addiction feels like?

Ian tried to think of something—anything—that wasn't sex.

Math.

He could think about math.

Algebra.

Calculus.

The Pythagorean theorem.

Except the Pythagorean theorem made him think of triangles, which made him think of the triangle of Derek's abs, which led directly back to Derek naked, which—

"STOP IT," he whispered fiercely to himself.

Okay, new strategy. Think about something unsexy. Something that would definitely kill the mood.

His grandmother's bridge club.

Yes.

Perfect.

Old ladies playing cards, eating those weird mints that taste like soap, talking about their cats—

But then his brain helpfully supplied: *What if Derek dressed up as an old-timey card dealer? With the visor and the arm bands and those sexy vests—*

"What is WRONG with me?!" Ian hissed into the pillow.

Maybe, a traitorous part of his brain suggested, you're just really, REALLY attracted to your boyfriend and that's actually completely normal and healthy and Derek would probably be flattered?

No, Ian argued with himself. *No, because if I go out there and immediately demand sex, I'll seem desperate. Clingy. Like I only want him for his body.*

Even though right now you kind of do only want him for his body, his brain pointed out unhelpfully. Or at least, his body is VERY high on the priority list. Like, top three. Maybe top one.

Ian groaned. This was ridiculous. He was having an argument with himself about whether wanting to have sex with his boyfriend made him a sex maniac, when obviously the answer was no, except also his body was screaming YES PLEASE MORE NOW and how was he supposed to just casually walk into that kitchen and act normal when all he could think about was—

A new thought struck him, even worse than the previous ones:

What if this is, like, a limited-time offer? What if Derek only wants to do it once or twice and now he's done and I've missed my window by not immediately demanding round three when I had the chance?

Panic fluttered in his chest. What if Derek was out there thinking, "Well, that was nice, but I don't want to overwhelm the kid"? What if Derek was being a responsible adult about this while Ian was in here having a complete meltdown about wanting more sex?

Then another thought: *What if I ask and he says no? What if he thinks I'm too much? Too demanding? What if—*

Actually, Ian's rational brain tried to interject, remember how Derek literally said "you're mine" and looked at you like you were the best thing he'd ever seen and made you feel like a god? Pretty sure he's interested.

But what if that was just heat-of-the-moment stuff? What if in the cold light of day—

It's not even cold, his brain argued. It's actually quite warm. The sun is shining. Birds are singing. And you're lying here having a psychological crisis about whether it's acceptable to want to have sex with your boyfriend.

Put like that, it did seem a bit ridiculous.

Okay, Ian thought, taking a deep breath and trying to compose himself. *You're going to get up. Put on some clothes. Act like a normal human being who doesn't want to climb Derek Lawson like a tree. You can be cool. You can be casual. You absolutely will NOT let him know that you're already thinking about when you can have sex again.*

Even if it's the only thing you're thinking about.

Even if your body is basically screaming "MORE PLEASE."

Even if you're pretty sure if Derek so much as looks at you the right way, you'll spontaneously combust from desire.

You will be dignified and mature about this.

Ian took another deep breath, trying to will away his body's very enthusiastic response to the memories. The soreness was real, a constant reminder that maybe jumping Derek immediately wasn't the best idea anyway. His body needed time to recover, even if his libido had apparently decided that pain was a mere suggestion.

Besides, he reasoned with himself, Derek probably thinks I'm some innocent virgin who needed careful handling. If I immediately demand more sex, he'll realize I'm actually just... just...

Completely obsessed with how he made me feel. Addicted to the way he touched me. Desperate to experience that again and again and—

"Stop it," Ian whispered to himself, squeezing his eyes shut. "Get a grip."

But even as he tried to calm himself, to be rational and mature about this, one thought kept circling back, persistent and undeniable:

Derek Lawson is incredibly good at sex, and I am the luckiest person alive to have experienced that, and I really, really, REALLY want to do it again.

Preferably soon.

Like... maybe after breakfast?

Is that too soon?

Am I broken?

Is there a handbook for this? "So You've Had Amazing Sex For The First Time: A Guide To Not Seeming Desperate"?

You're spiraling, his rational brain noted. This is what spiraling looks like.

Ian forced himself to take three deep breaths. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Like his mom had taught him for anxiety. Except usually his anxiety was about things like finals or whether people liked him, not about whether it was acceptable to be attracted to his boyfriend.

Okay. New plan. He would get up. Get dressed. Go into the kitchen. Have a normal conversation. Eat breakfast. Be a normal person. And if Derek gave ANY indication that he also wanted to have sex again, then—and only then—would Ian consider making a move.

This was a solid plan. A mature plan. A plan that didn't involve throwing himself at Derek like some kind of crazed—

As the initial euphoria settled into something more contemplative, other thoughts began to infiltrate his mind, pushing past the haze of desire. What did this mean for them now? Were they a couple? The word '*boyfriend*' flitted through his consciousness, sending a simultaneous jolt of excitement and terror through his nervous system.

Derek's boyfriend.

I'm Derek Lawson's boyfriend.

The thought made him giddy and terrified in equal measure.

And what about his family? Gavin? The wedding that loomed on the horizon like a storm cloud? The future that had seemed bewilderingly uncertain yesterday now felt even more unpredictable, yet paradoxically rich with possibility, like looking at a map of uncharted territory.

His thoughts circled back to Derek—always back to Derek, like planets orbiting the sun—wondering where he was, what he was thinking in the cold light of morning. *Did he harbor any regrets?* Ian quickly pushed that thought away, unwilling to entertain such doubts, refusing to let anxiety taint the perfection of what they'd shared.

No, he thought firmly. The way Derek had looked at him, whispered his name like a prayer, traced the contours of his body with reverent hands—none of that could be manufactured. None of that could be faked.

A waft of coffee reached him, accompanied by the gentle clattering of kitchenware and the soft humming of a tune Ian couldn't

quite place. Derek was out there, making breakfast. The simple domesticity of it struck Ian with unexpected force, making his smile widen until his cheeks hurt. This was real. This was happening. Derek was making him breakfast the morning after they'd had sex, which seemed like boyfriend behavior, which made Ian's heart do that complicated gymnastics routine again.

As he lay there, limbs heavy with satisfied exhaustion—and okay, maybe a little bit of arousal he was determinedly ignoring—Ian felt gratitude bloom in his chest like a time-lapse flower. Grateful for Derek, for his friends who had supported him when he could barely support himself, for the courage to come out and claim what he wanted, for this crystalline moment of pure happiness that felt stolen from someone else's life, someone braver and more sure of themselves.

Yes, challenges loomed on the horizon like storm clouds gathering. Yes, difficult conversations and potential heartaches awaited beyond this sanctuary. But right now, in this moment suspended between night and day, Ian felt more authentically himself than he ever had before. More real, more present, more alive.

With a deep breath that filled his lungs with determination—and a stern mental reminder to keep his hands to himself and not immediately seduce Derek—Ian sat up, ready to face the day and Derek and whatever came next.

Whatever came next, he knew one certainty: last night had changed everything, and he couldn't wait to discover what that meant.

Even if what it meant was that he was apparently now a sex-crazed maniac who couldn't stop thinking about Derek's hands and mouth and—

"Stop," he whispered to himself one more time, firmly.

"Breakfast first. Sex thoughts later. Be cool."

But maybe after breakfast...

Ian sat on the edge of the bed, pulling on his briefs with the firm intention of being mature and dignified about this whole situation. He was going to walk into that kitchen, have a nice civilized breakfast, make pleasant conversation, and absolutely NOT throw himself at Derek like some kind of—

Ian looked down at his briefs...his erection hard as a rock and standing straight up.

Well, shit.

So much for playing it cool.

His body had apparently decided to stage a full rebellion against his brain's carefully constructed plan of mature dignity. There was no hiding this. It was like his penis had its own agenda, and that agenda was screaming "**DEREK LAWSON NOW PLEASE.**"

Ian stared down at himself with a mixture of resignation and disbelief.

Is this my life now? Am I just going to be permanently aroused? Is this what being eighteen is like, or is this a Derek-specific problem?

He tried thinking about baseball. His grandmother. That weird documentary about sponges he'd watched for biology class.

Nothing worked. His body remained enthusiastically interested in only one subject: Derek Lawson and the many, many ways they could be naked together.

"Okay," Ian whispered to himself. "Okay. You know what? Screw it."

The thought came with sudden clarity, with the same reckless courage that had propelled him onto the dance floor at Menjo's, that had made him say yes to coming home with Derek in the first place.

I want him. Why should I pretend I don't?

"Derek?" Ian called out, his voice carrying across the loft, stronger than he'd expected.

The sounds from the kitchen stopped. "Yeah?" Derek's voice drifted back, warm and slightly distracted.

Ian's heart hammered against his ribs.

Okay. Okay, you can do this. Just... ask for what you want. Be direct. He's your boyfriend now.

Boyfriends have sex.

That's a thing boyfriends do.

"Can you... can you come here for a second?" Ian tried to keep his voice casual, but it came out breathier than intended, revealing everything.

There was a pause, then the sound of something being set down—a pan, maybe—and footsteps approaching. Derek appeared in the doorway, still *gloriously* shirtless, a dish towel slung over one shoulder, looking like every domestic fantasy Ian had ever had.

"Everything okay?" Derek asked, his expression concerned but curious, his eyes doing that thing where they swept over Ian like a physical touch.

Ian stood slowly, acutely aware that he was wearing only his briefs, that his body was already responding to Derek's proximity, that there was no hiding what he wanted.

"I, um..." He bit his lip, gathering courage. "I know we just... I mean, last night was... and I'm probably *supposed* to *wait* or something, *but...*"

Derek's expression shifted, understanding dawning. His eyes darkened, pupils dilating as he read Ian's body language, as he saw the way Ian was looking at him.

"*But?*" he prompted, his voice dropping to that register that made Ian's knees weak.

"But I *can't* stop thinking about it," Ian admitted in a rush, his cheeks flaming. "About you. About how you made me feel. And I know

I'm probably being ridiculous, and you probably think I'm some kind of sex maniac, and my body is still sore from last night, but I just—I want you again. *Now*. Is that... is that crazy?"

Derek's expression transformed, surprise giving way to something heated and hungry and deeply pleased.

"*Crazy?*" he repeated, moving into the room with predatory grace. "Ian, that's the *hottest* thing anyone's ever said to me."

"Really?" Ian's voice came out small, hopeful. "You don't think I'm... I don't know... too much?"

Derek closed the distance between them, his hands coming to rest on Ian's hips, pulling their bodies flush together so Ian could feel exactly how not-too-much Derek thought he was.

"Are you *kidding*? Do you have any idea what it *does* to me, knowing I made you feel so good you want *more*?" His voice was rough, honest. "Knowing that I'm your first, that I'm the one who gets to teach you what your body can do?"

Ian's breath caught. "So... we *can*?"

"Baby," Derek murmured, walking Ian backward toward the bed, "if you want me, I'm *yours*. Always. You *never* have to be afraid to ask for what you want." His hands slid down to cup Ian's backside, squeezing gently. "Ooooh, this booty lives rent free in my brain. Look how perfectly it fits in my hands. Jesus! But I need to know—are you *actually* okay? You said you're sore. I don't want to hurt you."

Ian nodded quickly, already reaching for Derek, pulling him closer. "I'm okay. A little sore, but... God, Derek, I *need* you. I need to feel you inside me again. *Please*." Ian took his hand and rubbed the bulge that had appeared in Derek's sweatpants. Felt it pulse. He smiled and looked directly into Derek's eyes.

"I'm burning for it, Derek. I'm aching to be owned by it."

Derek groaned, the sound vibrating through both their bodies.

"You're going to kill me, Mitchell. *Death by an incredibly hot boyfriend*." But even as he said it, he was lowering Ian onto the bed, settling between his legs with practiced ease. "Tell me if it's too much, okay? Promise me."

"I promise," Ian breathed, arching up to capture Derek's lips in a kiss that was hungry and desperate, that communicated everything he couldn't find words for.

It didn't take long for the kisses to turn into just their tongues exploring each other's mouths. Under his sweatpants, Derek's erection rubbed against Ian's under his briefs. Ian returned each thrust as his hands roamed all over Derek's body, feeling his muscles bulge.

"Is *this* what you were thinking about?" Derek murmured against his skin, his hand sliding down to palm Ian through his briefs. "Lying naked in my bed, thinking about last night?"

"Yes," Ian gasped, his hips bucking into the touch. "Couldn't stop. The minute I woke up, all I could think of was your body. Kept remembering how you felt, how you made me feel. I've never... I didn't know it could be like that."

Derek's eyes were nearly black with desire when he pulled back to look at Ian. "Like what?"

"Perfect," Ian whispered. "You made it perfect. Made me feel..." He struggled for words. "Like I was exactly where I was supposed to be. Like my body finally made sense. I like that you show me who's the boss in your bed."

"Fuck," Derek breathed, and Ian felt him tremble slightly. "You can't say things like *that* and expect me to go slow."

"Then *don't* go slow," Ian challenged, emboldened by Derek's obvious desire, by the power he felt in being wanted this much. "Show me what it's like when you don't have to be so careful. Lose control. Just burn, Derek."

Derek's eyes flashed with something primal. "Oh, I'm burning up—you sexy little *fucker*—It feels so fucking good."

"I can take it," Ian insisted, his legs wrapping around Derek's waist, pulling him closer. "I want to feel it tomorrow. Want to remember this every time I move."

"Oh, my *God*," Derek's control visibly snapped. His kiss turned bruising, possessive, as his hands made quick work of Ian's briefs, of his own sweatpants. "You're sure?" he asked one more time, even as his hands were reaching for the lube, even as his body was already positioning itself.

"So sure," Ian confirmed, spreading his legs wider in invitation. "Please, Derek. I need you."

Derek's expression transformed, surprise giving way to something heated and tender. The space between them vanished, and for a while the world did too. What followed was a blur of growls and moans, of laughter and breath, of skin and whispered names, of rediscovery and wanting.

Derek set the blaze, and Ian let it consume him.

Ian felt Derek release inside him, and he came with him without laying a finger on himself.

"Good fucking lord!"

He was inexperienced, but he knew that didn't happen to everyone.

This was chemistry.

When the light changed and the air cooled, they were wrapped in sheets and each other, too sated and happy to move.

"You," Derek said between kisses, "are incredible. Amazing. Perfect."

Ian laughed breathlessly, his body pleasantly heavy with satisfaction. "I can't believe we just did that."

"Which part? The sex or you asking for it like a complete seductress?"

"I wasn't—I didn't—" Ian protested, but Derek cut him off with another kiss.

"You absolutely *were*," Derek said firmly. "*You* seduced me, Ian Mitchell! Calling me in here, telling me you couldn't stop thinking about last night, batting those pretty eyes, and asking me to show you what it's like when I don't have to be careful." He shook his head in wonder.

"Do you have any idea how hot that was?"

Ian buried his face in Derek's chest, equal parts pleased and embarrassed. "I was worried you'd think I was a sex maniac."

Derek laughed, the sound rumbling through his chest. "Baby, if wanting to have sex with your boyfriend makes you a sex maniac, then we're both guilty. Trust me, I've been thinking about getting back inside you since the moment I woke up."

"Really?"

"Really. But I was trying to be responsible. Feed you breakfast, make sure you were physically and emotionally okay, not pressure you." Derek pulled back to look at Ian, his expression tender. "I'm glad you told me what you wanted. You never have to hide that from me, okay? If you want me, I want to know. *Always*. You do not have to be embarrassed about anything."

Ian nodded, feeling warmth spread through his chest that had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with being seen, being understood, being accepted completely. "Okay," he whispered.

"Now," Derek said, his voice returning to something more practical, "how about I draw you a bath? Might help with the soreness."

"Or," Ian suggested, his hand trailing down Derek's chest with newfound boldness, "you could join me in the bath."

Derek groaned. "You're going to be the death of me, Mitchell. The absolute death of me."

But he was smiling as he said it, and Ian was smiling too, and as Derek lifted him effortlessly to carry him toward the bathroom, Ian thought that maybe being a sex maniac wasn't such a bad thing after all.

"Just wait until we start trying different positions!" Derek said with a wink.

"There are positions?!"

"Oh, baby..." Derek chuckled. "You have no idea..."

Yes. Being a sex maniac wasn't such a bad thing if it meant more time touching Derek, kissing Derek, being with Derek in every possible way.

Not when it meant feeling this alive, this wanted, this completely and utterly satisfied.

The bathroom was as impressive as the rest of the loft—all black tile and chrome fixtures, with a massive clawfoot tub that looked like it could fit three people comfortably. Derek set Ian down gently on the closed toilet seat while he ran the water, adjusting the temperature until it was perfectly hot without being scalding.

"Fancy," Ian observed, watching Derek move around the space with easy familiarity.

"One of the reasons I bought this place," Derek admitted, adding what smelled like eucalyptus bath oil to the water. "After everything with my dad, with Blake... I needed a space that felt safe. Somewhere I could take care of myself." He glanced at Ian, vulnerability flashing across his features. "Somewhere I could heal."

Ian's heart squeezed at the admission. "And now?"

"Now," Derek said, helping Ian into the tub before climbing in behind him, settling Ian between his legs so Ian's back rested against his chest, "I get to share it with you."

They sat in comfortable silence for a few moments, Ian relaxing into Derek's warmth as the hot water soothed his aching muscles. Derek's hands moved in lazy patterns across Ian's chest, his stomach, his thighs—not sexual, just... intimate. Claiming. Learning.

But then Ian shifted slightly, and he felt Derek's renewed arousal pressing against his lower back.

"Again?" Ian asked, unable to keep the pleased surprise from his voice.

Derek groaned, his breath hot against Ian's ear. "I told you, you're going to kill me. Can't help it when you're naked and wet and pressed against me like this."

Ian turned his head to capture Derek's lips in a kiss, tasting chlorine and want. "Then maybe," he murmured against Derek's mouth, "you should do something about it."

Their laughter dissolved into silence, into heat that felt inevitable. The water sloshed softly as they found each other again, slower this time, gentler, a quiet continuation of the night before.

After, they actually bathed, Derek washing Ian's hair with careful attention, his fingers massaging Ian's scalp until Ian was practically purring. Ian returned the favor, learning the contours of Derek's body with soapy hands, committing every detail to memory.

By the time they finally emerged from the bath—pruned and satisfied and thoroughly clean—Ian could barely stand, his legs shaky from three rounds of sex and the hot water. Derek wrapped him in a

fluffy towel that was softer than anything Ian owned, then carried him back to the bedroom despite Ian's laughing protests.

"I can walk!"

"Barely," Derek countered, depositing Ian on the bed with a grin. "And whose fault is that?"

"Yours," Ian shot back. "For being so good at sex that I can't help wanting more."

Derek's expression turned smug. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"You should," Ian said, watching Derek move around the room gathering clothes. "Seriously, Derek. I had no idea it could be like this. That I could feel like this."

Derek paused, his expression softening. He crossed back to the bed, cupping Ian's face gently. "It's not just me," he said seriously. "It's us. Together. Chemistry. Connection. Whatever you want to call it." He pressed a tender kiss to Ian's forehead. "I've never felt like this before either."

The admission made Ian's heart swell. "Really?"

"Really," Derek confirmed. "Now get dressed before I decide we need a fourth round and you can't walk at all tomorrow."

Ian laughed, but he obeyed, pulling on his briefs and then—after a moment's hesitation—reaching for a discarded t-shirt that clearly belonged to Derek. The soft cotton engulfed him, hanging comically off one shoulder and extending to mid-thigh, but he couldn't resist the juvenile thrill of wearing his lover's clothes, of being surrounded by Derek's scent.

Derek pulled on his low-hanging sweatpants, leaving his chest bare in a way that made him look ready for a photo shoot for the Abercrombie & Fitch catalogue.

"Time for sustenance!" Derek yelled, sprinting toward the kitchen.

Ian followed more slowly, his body pleasantly sore in a way that would definitely remind him of this morning every time he sat down. He paused at the threshold of the kitchen, taking a moment to simply observe Derek as he cracked open eggs and scrambled the insides in a bowl—the easy way he moved, the flex of muscles beneath golden skin, the domesticity of this incredibly attractive man cooking for him.

This is my life now, Ian thought, barely able to believe it. This is real.

Derek looked up as he poured the egg mixture into the sizzling pan, catching Ian watching him. His face lit up with that sunrise smile, dimples appearing. "Hey, stud muffin," he said, as if Ian had just woken up rather than spent the last hour having sex in multiple locations. "So... breakfast? I'm pretty sure I can make omelets without burning them if

I'm not distracted by my incredibly sexy boyfriend calling me to the bedroom."

"Your incredibly sexy boyfriend?" Ian repeated, warmth flooding his chest at the easy way Derek used that word, like it was already settled, already real.

"Mine," Derek confirmed, setting down the pan and crossing to pull Ian into his arms. "All mine. And I'm yours. Okay?"

"Okay," Ian whispered, pressing his face against Derek's bare chest, breathing him in. "More than okay."

As they settled at the small kitchen island twenty minutes later—this time with perfectly cooked omelets, steaming plates filled with melted American cheese, caramelized onions, and diced green peppers before them—Ian couldn't help but marvel at the unexpected domesticity of it all.

If anyone had told him a week ago that he'd be sitting in Derek Lawson's kitchen, wearing his shirt, having just had sex three times in various locations, he would have questioned their sanity. Yet here he was, and nothing had ever felt more natural.

They ate in comfortable silence for several minutes, the only sounds the scrape of forks against plates and the occasional appreciative hum from Ian.

"This is amazing," Ian said after swallowing a particularly perfect bite. "Who knew the great Derek Lawson had hidden culinary talents?"

Derek mock-preened, striking a pose that showcased his impressive torso. "I'm a man of many secrets, Mitchell. Honestly, everything I know about cooking I learned from your mom. This is just the tip of the talented iceberg."

Ian chuckled, his eyes catching on something he'd never noticed before—a small, circular scar on Derek's forearm, slightly raised and lighter than the surrounding skin. Without thinking, he reached out, his fingers gently tracing the mark.

Derek stiffened subtly, muscles tensing beneath Ian's touch before deliberately relaxing with a measured exhale. "I guess it's time I told you about that," he said, his voice carrying a weight that hadn't been present moments before.

Setting down his fork with deliberate care, Derek took a deep breath that expanded his chest before deflating it slowly, like he was bracing himself for impact. "You know I moved in with your family when I was sixteen, right?"

Ian nodded, his breakfast forgotten as he registered the shift in Derek's demeanor, the way his shoulders squared slightly as if preparing to carry a heavy weight. He could see the change in Derek's eyes—that carefully maintained brightness dimming, clouds moving

across a blue sky. "But you never knew why," Derek continued, his gaze fixed somewhere beyond Ian, perhaps into a past he rarely revisited, looking at ghosts only he could see.

Something in Derek's expression—a shadow that flitted across his features like a cloud passing before the sun—made Ian's heart constrict painfully in his chest. He remained silent, instinctively understanding that Derek needed space to navigate this narrative in his own way, that some stories required silence to be told.

Derek's eyes grew distant, as if peering through a window to a darker time, to a version of himself that had been broken and reassembled. A muscle twitched in his jaw, tension radiating through his body, and Ian could see the weight of buried trauma etched in the lines that suddenly appeared around his mouth, aging him in an instant. "My dad... he was an alcoholic. Abusive." The words came out flat, clinical, as if emotion would make them unbearable. "When I finally worked up the courage to tell my parents I was gay, he... he didn't take it well."

Ian's stomach dropped, dread pooling cold and heavy. He'd known, intellectually, that Derek had come from a difficult home. But knowing and knowing were two different things, and suddenly the scar beneath his fingertips felt like a brand, like evidence of cruelty he couldn't comprehend.

Ian listened with growing horror, his heart twisting in his chest as if someone was physically wringing it like a wet cloth, as Derek recounted the events of that terrible night. His voice remained steady, controlled, but Ian could hear the tremor beneath—the sixteen-year-old boy who'd been terrified, who'd been hurt, who'd lost everything in a single moment.

How his father had drunkenly woken him—yanked from sleep by pain, by the smell of burning flesh, by his own screams—by pressing a lit cigarette to his arm. The very scar that Ian had just touched with such innocent curiosity, not knowing he was touching evidence of hatred, of cruelty, of a father's rejection made literal in burned flesh. How he'd been violently ejected from his own home with nothing but the clothes on his back and a bruise blooming on his cheekbone like a poisonous flower, purple and yellow and proof of violence.

"He told me that if he ever caught me sleeping in 'that bed' again, he would douse my mattress with kerosene and flick cigarettes at me until I was forced out." Derek's voice trembled almost imperceptibly as he spoke, his fingers tightening around his coffee mug until his knuckles blanched white, until Ian worried the ceramic might crack beneath the pressure. "Like I was vermin. Like I was something to be exterminated rather than his son."

Ian felt tears prick his eyes, hot and unwelcome. He blinked them back, knowing Derek needed him to be strong, to listen without

falling apart, but God, it hurt. The image of sixteen-year-old Derek—probably not much younger than Ian was now—being burned, being beaten, being thrown out like garbage...

"My mom just stood there," Derek said, his voice dropping to something barely above a whisper, rough with old pain that time hadn't quite healed. "She didn't say a word, didn't try to stop him. She just... watched." He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. "That... that almost hurt more than the burn. The physical pain faded eventually, but knowing she chose him over me, chose his hatred over her own son..." He trailed off, staring into his coffee like it held answers he'd been searching for.

The kitchen seemed to hold its breath as Derek spoke, as if the very walls were leaning in to listen, to bear witness. The morning light now cast longer shadows across his face, illuminating the vulnerability he usually kept carefully hidden beneath charm and confidence, beneath the armor of perfection he'd constructed. His coffee sat forgotten, growing cold as he shared pieces of himself that he usually kept locked away from the world, secrets he'd buried so deep Ian felt privileged and heartbroken to be trusted with them.

Ian noticed how Derek's hands trembled slightly around his mug when he mentioned his mother, the almost imperceptible crack in his voice betraying wounds deeper than the physical scar on his arm. Deeper than skin, bone-deep, soul-deep. The kind of wounds that never quite healed, just scarred over. The moment felt sacred, as if Derek was entrusting him with something precious and fragile that few had been allowed to witness, as if he was handing Ian his heart and trusting him not to break it.

Ian reached across the table, covering Derek's hand with his own, feeling the tension thrumming through Derek's body like a live wire. "I had no idea," he said softly, his throat tight with emotion, with rage at people he'd never met, with overwhelming gratitude that Derek had survived. "I remember you moving in, but... no one ever told me why. I just knew that suddenly you were there, in the basement, and Gavin said you were staying with us now."

Derek nodded, a sad smile ghosting across his lips like a shadow of happiness that couldn't quite materialize. "Your parents were amazing. Gavin told them what happened, and they didn't even hesitate. They set up that room in the basement for me and gave me a home when I had nowhere else to go." His voice strengthened slightly, gratitude warming the edges. "They asked no questions, demanded nothing in return. Just... took me in. Made me family. Four kids of their own to raise, and now... an orphan on their porch."

"I was twelve," Ian recalled, memory suddenly sharp and clear, vivid as a photograph. He could see it—the excitement he'd felt, not understanding the pain behind it, just thrilled that Derek Lawson was

going to live in his house. "I was ecstatic that you were going to be living with us. I thought it was the coolest thing ever." He paused, a slight blush coloring his cheeks, heat spreading down his neck. "In fact," he added, his voice dropping, "I vividly remember you coming out of the bathroom in nothing but a towel around your waist... and then I knew."

Derek chuckled at the memory, a hint of color dusting his own cheeks, some of the darkness lifting from his expression. "I guess I wasn't very subtle, huh? Walking around half-naked in front of a twelve-year-old with a crush."

"Not at all," Ian replied with a grin, grateful to see Derek smiling again, even if it was tinged with sadness. "But I'm glad you weren't. That moment... it was like something clicked into place. I knew I was gay, and I knew I wanted you. Even at twelve, I just... knew."

Derek's expression softened, his thumb stroking across Ian's knuckles with devastating tenderness. "Your parents saved me, Ian," he said, his voice regaining strength, conviction replacing the tremor. "In more ways than one. They gave me shelter, sure, but more than that... they gave me hope. Showed me that family doesn't have to be blood, that love doesn't have to come with conditions." He paused, then added with deliberate lightness, though the shadow hadn't entirely left his eyes, "I mean, your mom's lasagna! That alone is worth enduring any family drama. Plus, your dad's dad jokes? Comedy gold. I was living the dream."

They laughed together, the sound dispelling some of the heaviness that had settled over them like morning fog burning off. Derek turned his hand to intertwine his fingers with Ian's, the simple touch communicating volumes—trust, gratitude, connection. Their joined hands on the table looked right, looked inevitable, like they'd been designed to fit together this way.

"With their support," Derek continued, his voice gaining momentum, rising and falling with the cadence of someone recounting not just facts but a personal mythology that had shaped their existence, "I was able to defy the haters and prove my worth. My musical talents landed me a job that helped me afford the ultimate freedom: a car and this loft in the heart of the city." His expression softened with remembered gratitude, with wonder at how far he'd come. "My grandmother passed away just before I graduated and left me a substantial amount of money. She made sure there was no way my parents could touch it—had her lawyer set it up in a trust that bypassed them entirely. She knew. I think she always knew about my dad, about what he was capable of, and she wanted to make sure I'd be okay."

Ian found himself mesmerized by the passion in Derek's voice, the way his free hand gesticulated to emphasize key points, painting pictures in the air. The subtle shifts in his expression as he navigated the

landscape of his past—pride when he talked about his achievements, sadness when he mentioned his grandmother, determination when he described building his life from scratch.

"I was smart," Derek continued, and Ian could hear the fierce pride there, the satisfaction of someone who'd beaten the odds. "I didn't waste time partying like most guys my age. I didn't blow it on stupid stuff. I used it to secure a future for myself, to build something that could never be taken away." He gestured around the loft with his free hand. "This place, my job, my independence—it's all mine. No one can take it from me. No one can burn it down or kick me out. It's mine."

Derek described how he had channeled his pain into determination, turning trauma into fuel, throwing himself into academics and sports with single-minded focus that bordered on obsession. Graduating with top honors had been just the beginning; what truly impressed Ian was learning that Derek had secured a position writing jingles for one of Detroit's most prestigious advertising agencies—creative work that combined his musical talent with his keen understanding of what moved people emotionally, that turned art into commerce in a way that was both practical and beautiful.

"You know that jingle for Buddy's Pizza?" Derek asked, a hint of pride in his smile. "The one that goes 'Buddy's got the square to spare'? That was mine. Or the one for that car dealership on Woodward? I wrote that too." He shrugged, but Ian could see the satisfaction there, the pride in work well done. "It's not composing symphonies, but it pays well, and I'm good at it. I understand what makes people remember things, what sticks in their heads."

When Derek finally fell silent, Ian sat stunned, processing the weight of these revelations like trying to swallow stones. His heart ached for the sixteen-year-old Derek—cast out and vulnerable, faced with cruelty from those who should have protected him most, carrying a burn scar and a broken heart and somehow finding the strength to survive. A complex brew of emotions swirled within him—rage at Derek's father that made his hands clench into fists, profound gratitude toward his own parents for taking Derek in, and overwhelming admiration for Derek's resilience in the face of such adversity.

He found himself looking at Derek with new understanding, new depth, seeing not just the confident, successful man he'd always admired from afar, but also the wounded boy who had transformed his pain into purpose, who had taken rejection and made it into determination. Ian's own anxieties about coming out seemed simultaneously more real—knowing the potential for rejection was not just theoretical but devastatingly possible—and somehow more manageable in comparison to what Derek had already overcome.

If Derek survived that and became this, Ian thought, maybe I can survive whatever comes next.

"Derek," Ian began, his voice thick with emotion, with too many feelings to name, "I... I don't know what to say. I'm so sorry you experienced that. But I'm also in awe of how you responded. You didn't just survive; you built something beautiful from the ashes. You took the worst thing that could happen and made it into... into this." He gestured around the loft, at Derek, at everything Derek had become. "You're incredible."

Derek's eyes softened at Ian's words, something vulnerable and grateful flickering across his features. He squeezed Ian's hand, his grip firm and warm and real. "Thank you," he said simply, the words carrying more weight than their simplicity suggested. "It wasn't an easy road, but having support—from your family, from Gavin—it made all the difference. I couldn't have done it alone. No one can do it alone."

Ian nodded, squeezing Derek's hand in return, feeling the solid warmth of him, the realness of this moment. "I hope... I hope I can find even a fraction of your courage when it's my turn to come out. To tell my parents, to face whatever comes."

Derek's expression grew serious, his blue eyes intent, focused on Ian with laser precision. "Listen to me, Ian. You're already braver than you know. You came out to your friends. You went to Menjo's. You took a chance on me, on us. That takes guts." His voice dropped to a fierce whisper, passionate and certain. "And you won't be alone. I'll be right beside you, every step of the way. I promise you that. Whatever happens, whatever your parents say, you're not facing it alone."

They stood simultaneously, drawn together by an unspoken need for physical connection, for the comfort of touch after such heavy revelations. Derek's arms encircled Ian, and Ian melted into the embrace, his face pressed against the warm skin of Derek's chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat—proof of survival, proof of strength, proof that terrible things could be endured and overcome. In this moment of vulnerability, of shared pain and healing, Ian felt closer to Derek than even their physical intimacy had allowed. Their bodies had connected, yes, but now their souls were touching, and it was somehow more profound, more meaningful.

And he recognized, with a clarity that both exhilarated and terrified him, that he was falling irrevocably in love with Derek Lawson. Not just attracted to him, not just infatuated, but falling—that terrifying freefall where you don't know if you'll fly or crash but you jump anyway because staying grounded is no longer an option.

After several heartbeats of silence, of simply holding each other in the morning light, Derek pressed a kiss to Ian's forehead and pulled back slightly, deliberately lightening the mood. "You should probably call Shawnee," he said, his voice carefully casual. "I'm sure she's dying

to hear from you. I want to keep my promise to her. Your friends need to like me! The cordless is on the counter. I brought it in here earlier so it wouldn't wake you if it rang."

Ian nodded, grateful for the slight return to normalcy, for stepping back from the emotional intensity of Derek's revelations into something lighter, easier. He picked up the phone, his heart racing with anticipation as he dialed Shawnee's number. He knew her well enough to predict exactly how this conversation would go—loud, enthusiastic, probably inappropriate, and exactly what he needed right now.

As soon as the call connected, her voice exploded through the receiver with characteristic enthusiasm, so loud Ian had to hold the phone slightly away from his ear to protect his hearing.

"Ian!? Oh my God, is that you?" The volume alone was enough to wake the entire neighborhood, and Ian could picture her—probably pacing around her apartment, already dressed for the day in something bold and colorful, her energy as bright as her wardrobe.

He laughed, warmth flooding his chest at the sound of his friend's voice, at the familiar comfort of her unfiltered excitement. "Yes, it's me. I just woke up."

After having full blown penetrative sex four times, he didn't add, though he knew Shawnee would demand those details soon enough.

Shawnee wasted no time on pleasantries, getting straight to the point with the subtlety of a sledgehammer. "Did you guys do it?" she demanded, her voice practically vibrating with excitement, with the barely contained energy of someone who'd been waiting hours for this call. "Please tell me you did it. I've been dying over here!"

Ian chuckled at her directness—so typical of Shawnee to just ask the most intimate question without preamble—glancing over at Derek who was pretending not to listen as he rinsed dishes at the sink. But the smile tugging at his lips and the tips of his ears turning pink gave him away completely, revealing that he was absolutely listening to every word. "Yes," Ian confirmed, his voice dropping to a confidential tone though still plenty audible in the small kitchen, knowing Derek could hear him and not particularly caring. "Yes, we did."

The squeal that erupted from the other end of the line was so piercing that Ian actually winced, pulling the phone away from his ear as Shawnee's joy manifested as pure sound. "OH MY GOD! I KNEW IT! I FUCKING KNEW IT!" There was the sound of something being knocked over, probably in Shawnee's enthusiasm. "Tell me everything! And I mean everything! Don't you dare leave out details!"

Ian's face heated, burning with a combination of embarrassment and pleasure, very aware of Derek listening, of those blue eyes tracking his every movement even while pretending to focus on the dishes. "I'm not giving you a play-by-play, Shawnee," he said,

trying for firm but landing somewhere closer to flustered. "Some things are private."

"Boo! You're no fun!" Shawnee protested, but her voice was warm with affection and teasing. "But seriously, Ian. Are you okay? Like, really okay? He didn't—he was good to you, right? Because you know I will absolutely come over there and kick his perfect ass if he wasn't."

The genuine concern beneath the teasing made Ian's throat tighten with emotion, with gratitude for friends who cared, who protected, who would go to war for him if needed. "I'm more than okay," he assured her, his voice soft, honest in a way that made Derek's hands still in the sink. "Shawnee, it was... God, it was perfect. He was perfect. So careful and sweet and just..." He trailed off, not having words for what he'd experienced, for how Derek had made him feel. "I didn't know it could be like that."

"Like what?" Shawnee's voice had gentled, matching Ian's tone, friend-to-friend rather than gossip-hungry.

"Like coming home," Ian said quietly, his eyes finding Derek's across the kitchen. Derek had turned now, no longer pretending not to listen, his expression open and vulnerable and so full of emotion it made Ian's breath catch. "Like everything finally making sense."

"Oh, honey," Shawnee said, her voice gone soft and almost tearful. "That's... that's beautiful. I'm so happy for you." She paused, then added with characteristic bluntness, "So does this mean you two are, like, together? Official? Because I need to know if I should be referring to Derek as your boyfriend now or what."

Ian glanced at Derek again, remembering their conversation earlier, the way Derek had said "I'm all yours too, Ian." "Yeah," he said, unable to keep the smile from his voice, unable to contain the joy that bubbled up like champagne. "Yeah, I think we are. Boyfriends. Derek and I are... we're together."

Another squeal, though this one was slightly more controlled, more manageable for human ears. "This is the best news! Oh my God, I can't wait to tell Renee and Amelia! They're going to die! We were all hoping—we thought you two had amazing chemistry at the club, but we weren't sure if—" She cut herself off. "Wait, but what about your family? Have you thought about that? Because, Ian, they're going to find out eventually, and with the wedding coming up..."

And there it was—reality crashing back in like cold water, washing away the warm bubble of happiness they'd been floating in. Ian's smile faded slightly, replaced by anxiety that sat heavy in his stomach. "I know," he said, his voice dropping, becoming more serious. "I know I need to tell them. I can't hide this forever, and I don't want to hide. But..." He swallowed hard, fear making his throat tight. "What if they react badly? What if they're like Derek's dad? What if—"

"Hey," Shawnee's voice was firm but gentle, cutting through his spiral before it could fully form. "One step at a time, okay? You don't have to figure everything out in the next five minutes. And whatever comes, you've got me in your corner. I've got your back, babe. Always. No matter what your parents say, no matter what happens, you've got people who love you for exactly who you are."

Ian felt a lump form in his throat at the unwavering support in her voice, at the certainty that even if his family rejected him, he wouldn't be alone. "Thanks, Shawnee. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Probably crash and burn spectacularly," Shawnee teased, lightening the mood with practiced ease, knowing when to push and when to pull back. "Now, about your parents—what's the immediate plan? They're probably wondering where their baby boy disappeared to. Your mom has probably called like seventeen times already, freaking out that you didn't come home."

"I was thinking I'd tell them I crashed at your place," Ian said, feeling guilty about the lie but not seeing another option, not ready to face that conversation yet. "Fell asleep on the couch watching movies or something. So, if they call..."

"I got your alibi locked down tighter than Fort Knox," Shawnee finished for him without hesitation, proving once again why she was his best friend, why he trusted her with everything. "Don't worry, I'll be the perfect accomplice. Your mom calls, I'll tell her you passed out during the third *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie because they're boring as hell and we had wine coolers. Easy." She paused, her tone growing more thoughtful, more serious. "But Ian," she added, "have you thought about what happens after the wedding? When you don't have to hide anymore? When you can actually be with Derek openly?"

Ian glanced at Derek again, who had moved to lean against the counter, watching him with a mixture of affection and concern in his eyes, his posture relaxed but his gaze intent. "I'm trying not to overthink it," he admitted, which was somewhat laughable given that overthinking was practically his default setting. "But... I want this, Shawnee. I want him. Whatever comes next, I'm ready to face it. I have to be. I already know how I will act after they know. How they act is up to them."

"Look at you," Shawnee said, and Ian could hear the smile in her voice, could picture her face—proud and maybe a little bit emotional. "All grown up and utterly smitten. I'm proud of you, Ian Mitchell. You've come so far from the guy who used to hide behind his sketchbook whenever Derek walked into a room, who would literally flee to the bathroom to avoid talking to him. And now, he has popped your cherry."

Ian felt warmth spread through his chest at Shawnee's words, at the recognition of how much he'd changed, how much courage he'd found. "Thanks, Shawnee. For everything. I promise I'll give you all the not-too-explicit details when I see you. Maybe lunch this week?"

"You better! I want to hear everything—well, not everything everything, but you know what I mean. The emotional stuff. The boyfriend stuff. How it feels to finally have what you've wanted for so long." She paused. "And Ian? I really am happy for you. You deserve this. You deserve someone who looks at you the way Derek was looking at you at the club. Like you're the only person in the room."

After chatting a bit longer about logistics—arranging to meet up for lunch on Wednesday, coordinating their cover story in case Ian's parents had questions, Shawnee making him promise to text her if anything went wrong—Ian said his goodbyes and hung up the phone. As he turned toward Derek, he felt a kaleidoscope of emotions tumbling through him—joy at having such supportive friends, anticipation about what came next with Derek, lingering nervousness about his family, and above all, a profound sense of rightness that seemed to align his entire being, that made everything feel like it was finally falling into place.

Derek kept his eyes deliberately focused on wiping down the counter, a model of careful nonchalance, though Ian could see the tension in his shoulders, the way he was very pointedly not looking up. "Everything okay?" he asked, his voice deliberately casual though his eyes, when they flicked up to meet Ian's, told a different story—hope and uncertainty and vulnerability all mixed together.

With a smile playing on his lips, Ian crossed the kitchen and wrapped his arms around Derek from behind, resting his chin on the taller man's shoulder in a gesture that already felt natural, that felt like something they'd been doing for years rather than hours. He could feel Derek's heart beating against his chest, could smell the lingering scent of soap and sandalwood from their bath.

"Everything is perfect," Ian whispered, his breath warm against the skin of Derek's neck, feeling Derek shiver slightly at the contact. "She asked if we were boyfriends now."

Derek turned within the circle of Ian's arms, his expression opening like a flower to reveal something vulnerable and hopeful that made Ian's breath catch, that made his heart stutter in his chest. Without a word, Derek leaned down and captured Ian's lips in a kiss that spoke volumes—tender but assured, a promise rather than a question, claiming and being claimed simultaneously. When they finally parted, Derek's smile illuminated his entire face, his eyes crinkling at the corners in a way that made Ian's heart perform gymnastics in his chest, made him feel like the luckiest person alive.

"I'd like that," Derek said, his gaze direct and unguarded, honest in a way that made Ian feel seen and valued. "I told you last night that you were mine now."

Ian nodded, remembering the possessive words whispered in the heat of passion, the way Derek had claimed him with words and body and soul. Derek's smile widened, a look of pure happiness transforming his features, making him look younger, less burdened. "I'm all yours too, Ian. If that's what you want."

"It is," Ian confirmed, feeling as though his chest might burst from the simple joy of this moment, from the rightness of finally having what he'd wanted for so long. "It's all I want."

As they moved around the kitchen finishing the breakfast cleanup—or re-cleanup, since they'd already done this once before getting distracted—Ian couldn't help but notice the subtle shifts in their interaction, the way everything had changed and yet felt completely natural. Derek's hand lingered on his lower back as he passed behind him to reach the cupboard, a casual intimacy that sent pleasant ripples down Ian's spine. Their eyes met more frequently, each glance carrying the weight of shared secrets and newfound connection, of bodies that now knew each other intimately, of hearts that were learning to trust.

"You missed a spot," Ian pointed out teasingly, indicating a bit of egg clinging stubbornly to the pan Derek was scrubbing.

Derek arched an eyebrow, mischief suddenly dancing in his eyes like sunlight on water. "Oh yeah?" In one fluid motion, he flicked water from his fingertips, droplets catching the light before spattering across the front of Ian's borrowed shirt.

Ian gasped in exaggerated outrage, then burst into laughter—the sound freer and more uninhibited than he could remember feeling in years, genuine joy rather than polite amusement. "You'll pay for that, Lawson," he threatened playfully, reaching for the sink sprayer with mock menace.

Derek caught his wrist with gentle fingers, tugging Ian closer until their bodies were pressed together, until Ian could feel Derek's heart beating against his own chest. "Oh yeah? How exactly do you plan on making me pay?" His voice dropped to a register that sent heat coursing through Ian's veins, that made him remember exactly how they'd spent the morning.

As they stood there, faces inches apart, dishes temporarily forgotten, Ian marveled at the ease of this new dynamic between them. The playful banter, the casual touches, the way Derek's presence simultaneously calmed and excited him—it was all so novel, yet somehow felt like returning to a place he'd always been meant to find, like coming home to somewhere he'd never been.

"You know," Ian said softly, his free hand coming to rest on Derek's chest, feeling the steady thump of his heart beneath his palm,

warm and real and alive, "I always imagined what this would be like. Being with you. But the reality..." He shook his head, momentarily lost for words, overwhelmed by the magnitude of what he felt. "It's so much better than anything I could have dreamed up."

Derek's eyes softened, his thumb tracing gentle circles on the inside of Ian's wrist that made Ian's pulse jump. "I know what you mean," he admitted, vulnerability peeking through his usual confidence like sun through clouds. "It's like... all these years, I saw you as Gavin's little brother. And now..."

"Now?" Ian prompted, his pulse quickening beneath Derek's touch, his entire body attuned to every point of contact between them.

"Now I see you, Ian. All of you. And you're..." Derek seemed to search for the right word, his brow furrowing slightly before his expression cleared, before certainty replaced hesitation. "You're incredible."

Ian felt his throat constrict with emotion, overwhelmed by the sincerity in Derek's voice, by being seen so completely and still being called incredible. He leaned forward, pressing his forehead against Derek's chest, breathing in the comforting scent that was already becoming familiar, already becoming home. "I'm scared," Ian confessed in a whisper, the words coming easier in this position, not having to meet Derek's eyes. "Not of this, of us. But of what comes next. Telling people. Facing the world. Losing my family."

Derek's arms encircled him, strong and reassuring, a fortress of safety against all the uncertainties. "Hey," he said gently, one hand coming up to tilt Ian's chin, ensuring their eyes met, making sure Ian heard this, believed this. "Whatever comes next, we face it together. Okay? You and me."

Derek's serious expression suddenly morphed into a comical superhero pose, muscles flexed dramatically as he adopted a mock-heroic stance that was so ridiculous and so endearing Ian couldn't help but laugh. "We're like Superman and Superboy, except with better fashion sense and significantly less spandex." He paused, his gaze sweeping appreciatively over Ian's form in the oversized t-shirt. "Though, come to think of it, you'd look pretty spectacular in spandex... That booty!?"

Ian burst out laughing, the tension breaking like a wave crashing on shore, washing away the fear and leaving only warmth behind. "You're ridiculous," he said, but the fondness in his voice was unmistakable, the love clear even if he wasn't ready to say the word yet.

"Part of my charm," Derek agreed with an unrepentant grin, pulling Ian back into his arms.

Ian nodded, feeling a surge of courage at Derek's easy confidence, at the way Derek made everything seem manageable,

survivable, possible. "You and me," he echoed, the simple phrase somehow weighted with promise, with commitment, with future.

Derek pointed at Ian with theatrical emphasis, "You." He pointed at himself, "Me." The gesture was endearingly dorky coming from someone usually so smooth, and it made Ian fall a little harder, a little deeper into whatever this was becoming.

As they stood there in the morning light, dishes forgotten in the sink for the second time that morning, Ian realized that everything had truly changed. The way they moved in each other's space, the casual touches that felt simultaneously novel and familiar, the way their eyes sought each other out—it was all different now. Deeper, richer with meaning, weighted with intimacy and trust and the beginning of something that felt like it could last.

And as daunting as the future might be, with all its uncertainties and inevitable challenges, Ian knew one thing with unshakable certainty: he wouldn't want to face it with anyone else by his side.

You and me, he thought, the words echoing in his mind like a promise, like a prayer, like the beginning of everything that mattered.

The weight of those words, the promise they contained, ignited something primal in Ian's core, something hungry and wanting and unashamed. With a boldness that surprised even himself—this new version of himself that Derek had helped create—he rose on his tiptoes and pressed their lips together in a kiss that quickly escalated from tender to heated, from sweet to demanding. Their breaths mingled in a passionate dance as Ian's hands began an eager exploration of Derek's body, tracing the contours of muscle and sinew that he was still getting to know, still memorizing, fingertips mapping territory that was becoming familiar but no less thrilling.

With newfound confidence born from hours of intimacy, from knowing he could make Derek respond, make him gasp and moan and lose that famous control, Ian's hand slipped beneath the waistband of Derek's sweatpants. His fingers wrapped around Derek's length, finding him already responding to their closeness, already half-hard just from kissing, from proximity, from want.

Derek's sharp intake of breath against Ian's lips was deeply satisfying, a tangible affirmation of his desire, proof that Ian could affect him as much as Derek affected Ian. His grin widened, revealing those perfect dimples that had featured in so many of Ian's adolescent fantasies, that had haunted his dreams for years. With a playful growl that rumbled from deep in his chest, Derek hoisted Ian over his shoulder in a fireman's carry, eliciting a surprised yelp that quickly dissolved into laughter.

"We've got a good hour before you properly digest that breakfast," Derek announced with mock seriousness, delivering a

playful smack to Ian's backside as he carried him toward the bedroom, Ian bouncing slightly with each step. "And I intend to make full use of that time."

Upon reaching the rumpled sheets that still bore evidence of their morning activities—sheets they'd never bothered to make, tangled and twisted and smelling like sex and satisfaction—Derek deposited Ian with theatrical gentleness onto the mattress, like he was something precious that needed careful handling despite the playful manhandling.

Ian bounced slightly on impact, laughing up at Derek who stood poised at the edge of the bed like a predator about to pounce, his eyes dark with want and amusement. But suddenly, an idea sparked in Ian's mind, one that he would never have had the courage to voice before last night, before he'd learned that Derek welcomed his desires, that asking for what he wanted made Derek hot rather than making him weird.

"Derek?" he ventured, his voice holding a note of hesitation, nervous excitement fluttering in his stomach.

Derek immediately stilled, his expression shifting to one of concern, all the playfulness draining away. "Yes? Are you okay?" The instant worry, the way Derek's entire focus narrowed to Ian's wellbeing, made Ian's heart squeeze with affection.

"I'm fine," Ian assured him quickly, not wanting Derek to worry. "But I have a... a question for you."

"Ask away, babe," Derek encouraged, the endearment sending a pleasant shiver down Ian's spine, making him feel claimed and cherished. The casual use of pet names was still new enough to thrill.

Ian looked up at Derek, who waited with uncharacteristic patience, no hint of impatience or judgment in his expression. Suddenly, his nerve faltered, embarrassment creeping up his neck in a heated flush. "Oh, forget it," he mumbled, looking away.

"Oh no, Lane..." Derek's voice took on a playful but firm quality as he placed one knee on the bed, leaning closer, his weight dipping the mattress. "That's one thing I can't stand. You can't leave me hanging now that you've got me curious. Come on, tell me what you were going to say."

Ian took a deep breath, gathering his courage, reminding himself that Derek had been nothing but receptive to everything so far, that they were building trust here. He'd already crossed so many personal thresholds in the past twenty-four hours; what was one more? "Do you still have your football uniform?" he asked in a rush, the words tumbling out before he could second-guess himself, before fear could make him swallow them back.

Derek's expression remained blank for a moment as he processed the question, his head tilting slightly. Then, as understanding dawned like sunrise breaking over his features, a slow, wicked grin

spread across his face, dimples carving deep grooves in his cheeks that made Ian's heart stutter and his breath catch.

"Ian Mitchell," Derek drawled, his voice rich with delighted surprise, with pleasure that Ian had asked for something, had voiced a fantasy. "You sly dog! Who knew such a devious mind was hiding behind that innocent face? You've got yourself a kinky, football jock fetish!" He laughed, the sound warm and approving rather than mocking. "Next thing I know, you'll be asking me to dress up as a fireman or a cowboy." His tone was teasing but appreciative, making Ian's stomach flutter with a mixture of embarrassment and arousal, heat pooling low in his belly.

"It's just an idea I had..." Ian demurred, his cheeks burning with self-consciousness even as excitement built within him, even as his body responded to the way Derek was looking at him—like Ian was fascinating, sexy, full of surprises.

"I'm all in!" Derek declared with enthusiasm that made Ian's embarrassment worth it, that made him glad he'd asked. "As it happens, I do still have it... Even the helmet and shoulder pads," he added with a waggle of his eyebrows that should have been ridiculous but was somehow incredibly sexy. "If you want, I could go put it on... and we can play that the quarterback needs urgent help with his biology final essay... and the only payment he can offer is..." He trailed off suggestively, his grin widening.

Ian's pulse quickened at the playful scenario, at Derek's willingness to play, to be silly and sexy all at once. A mischievous glint danced in his eyes as he considered the possibilities, as fantasy began taking shape. This playful, uninhibited side of Derek was yet another facet to discover, another layer to explore, proof that intimacy could be fun as well as intense.

"Sounds like a winning game plan to me," Ian replied with newfound boldness, surprised at his own daring, at how natural it felt to flirt, to play, to ask for what he wanted.

Derek winked playfully and disappeared into what must have been a storage closet—Ian heard the sliding door, the sound of boxes being moved. The sounds of rummaging filled the air, followed by the rustling of fabric and equipment as Derek changed into his old uniform piece by piece, each sound building anticipation, making Ian's heart race.

When Derek finally emerged fully outfitted in the football gear—pads creating an exaggerated silhouette that made his shoulders look impossibly broad, jersey stretched across his broad chest with the number one printed in bold white, tight pants leaving absolutely nothing to the imagination and showcasing his ass in a way that made Ian's mouth go dry—Ian couldn't contain the surge of desire that

coursed through him like electricity, hot and immediate and demanding.

Derek approached the bed with an exaggerated swagger, using the theatrical posturing of someone fully committed to their role, playing it up. He struck a pose at the foot of the bed, puffing out his chest and flexing his muscles in a parody of athletic bravado that managed to be both ridiculous and incredibly hot. Despite the comedic intent, the sight sent a wave of heat through Ian's body, making his pulse race and his breath catch, making him understand exactly why people had uniform kinks.

Ian bit his lip, enjoying the performance while also appreciating how the football uniform accentuated Derek's already impressive physique—the way the pads made his shoulders look even broader, the way the tight pants clung to his thighs and ass, the way the jersey emphasized the narrowness of his waist. The sight awakened something primal in him, a desire that had been temporarily sated but was rapidly reawakening, demanding and hungry.

"So, quarterback," Ian teased, eagerly playing along with their improvised scenario, getting into character, "what seems to be the problem with your biology essay?"

Ian dissolved into laughter that quickly became something warmer, hungrier. The game they played blurred into something real; teasing touches turned into kisses, and the rest became a tumble of heat and laughter.

Time slipped by in a blur of breath and heartbeat. The uniform came off Derek's form in a type of strip tease that Ian loved.

Derek showed Ian how to take a rise on The Lawson Express, and Ian enjoyed watching Derek's face as he straddled him. And when Derek finally put him on his back and took control, Ian felt the earth move.

This will always be the best, he thought. Lying on my back, my legs wrapped around him. My hands free to run my fingers through his hair. To rub his back, his chest, his arms... Face to face. When he can kiss me and be so deep inside of me and whisper into my ear how good I can make him feel.

Nothing has ever felt so right.

When the moans finally faded, they were tangled together beneath the sheets, skin damp and limbs comfortably entwined. The air was thick with warmth and the faint scent of Derek's cologne. Ian rested his head against Derek's chest, listening to the steady rhythm there, both of them quiet in that easy, post-storm calm that needed no words.

"You make me feel incredible," Derek murmured, his hands stroking up and down Ian's sides. "Every time. In every position. You're amazing, Ian. I just can't get enough of you."

They lay like that for long minutes, Derek softening inside Ian but neither wanting to break the connection. Finally, carefully, Derek pulled out and shifted to the side, immediately pulling Ian back into his arms.

"I want to fall asleep inside you, baby," Derek murmured against Ian's hair. "It's like Heaven. Like coming home."

Ian's heart swelled at the intimate confession, at the vulnerability in Derek's voice. "We could stay like this forever," he said softly, meaning it with everything in him. "Just you and me."

In that perfect moment of connection, nothing else seemed to matter. The world outside—with its expectations, complications, and uncertainties—felt distant and unimportant. Ian knew that reality would eventually reassert itself. His parents would start to worry, questions would need answering, and difficult conversations loomed on the horizon. But for now, wrapped in Derek Lawson's strong arms and bathed in the afterglow of their shared passion, he allowed himself to simply exist in this bubble of newfound joy.

In this suspended moment, they were complete, and everything was exactly as it should be.

12 – Secrets & Lies

The warm, golden rays of morning sunlight spilled through the cracked windshield of Derek's sleek Trans Am, catching dust motes that danced between them as the car rolled to a stop several blocks from the Mitchell house. Ian sat in the passenger seat, his fingers intertwined with Derek's, both of them clinging to this final moment of connection before reality intruded. The rumble of the powerful engine vibrated beneath them like a living heartbeat, providing a steady soundtrack to their reluctant farewell. In the distance, birds welcomed the new day with scattered melodies, oblivious to the bittersweet moment unfolding inside the car.

Ian's eyes nervously scanned the quiet suburban landscape, each sleepy house with its manicured lawn representing a potential witness. His paranoia painted neighbors peering through curtains, recognizing Derek's distinctive car, mentioning it casually to his parents over borrowed sugar or hedge-trimming small talk.

"I guess this is my stop," Ian said softly, his gaze fixed on their joined hands, memorizing the way Derek's larger fingers enveloped his own. His voice cracked slightly on the last word, betraying the emotion he was trying to contain.

Derek nodded, his thumb tracing small circles on Ian's palm, each gentle rotation sending currents of electricity up Ian's arm. "Yeah, I guess so." His voice was rough, strained with something that sounded suspiciously like pain.

They sat cocooned in silence, the weight of their shared night suspended between them like a fragile, precious thing neither wanted to disturb. The air inside the car felt thick, heavy with everything they weren't saying, with the enormity of what they'd found and were now being forced to release.

Ian finally raised his eyes, meeting Derek's gaze. The intensity he found there—desire mingled with tenderness and something deeper that neither was ready to name—made his breath catch like fabric on a thorn. Derek's blue eyes were suspiciously bright, glassy in a way that made Ian's own eyes sting in response.

"I don't want to go," Ian admitted, his voice barely carrying above the idling engine. The confession felt like ripping something vital from his chest. "I don't know how to... how do I just walk away from you right now?"

Derek's free hand came up to cup Ian's cheek, callused fingertips impossibly gentle against his skin. His thumb stroked across Ian's cheekbone once, twice, as if trying to memorize the shape of him through touch alone. "I don't want you to go either," he replied, the morning light catching the flecks of gold in his blue eyes, making them shimmer with unshed tears. "God, Ian, I feel like I'm being torn in half.

How is that possible? How can you have this much power over me already?"

Ian leaned into Derek's touch, his eyelids fluttering closed as he savored the warmth of that palm against his cheek, trying to imprint the sensation into his memory so he could conjure it later. "I know. It's just... last night was..." His voice broke completely, emotion overwhelming his ability to speak.

"Perfect," Derek finished, his voice husky with remembered pleasure and present anguish. "It was perfect. You were perfect." His fingers tightened almost imperceptibly against Ian's face, as if he could hold him there through sheer force of will. "I've never... Ian, I've *never* felt like this. Like I'd do anything to keep you right here *with* me. Like letting you go is physically hurting me."

A single tear escaped down Ian's cheek, caught and wiped away by Derek's thumb. Ian's eyes opened, a small, trembling smile playing across his lips as he found Derek watching him with such naked adoration it made his chest ache. "Yeah," he whispered, his own hand coming up to cover Derek's where it still cradled his face. "It was. You were."

Neither of them moved for a long moment, frozen in this tableau of reluctant parting. Ian could see his own reflection in Derek's eyes, could see the war playing out across Derek's features—the desire to say 'fuck it' to everything and just drive away together battling against responsibility and reason.

Derek leaned forward, bridging the small space between them to press his lips against Ian's in a kiss that held none of last night's urgency but all of its intimacy, amplified by desperation. It was tender and bittersweet, carrying both goodbye and promise in equal measure. Ian's free hand fisted in Derek's shirt, pulling him closer, kissing him harder, trying to pour everything he felt—everything he couldn't yet say—into the connection of their mouths.

When they finally parted, both breathing heavily, Derek rested his forehead against Ian's, their breaths mingling in the small space between them. Ian could feel Derek's eyelashes flutter against his own skin, could feel the tremor running through Derek's body that matched his own.

"We'll see each other soon," Derek murmured, his voice a low rumble that Ian felt as much as heard, vibrating through the points where their bodies touched. "At the rehearsal dinner on Thursday. But we'll find a way to be alone before then. I promise. I can't... Ian, I can't wait until Thursday. I won't make it."

Ian nodded, attempting to ignore the strange, hollow ache spreading beneath his ribs, threatening to crack him open. "I know. It's ridiculous to feel this..." he searched for the right word, his voice thick

with tears he was trying not to shed, "...bereft when I know I'll see you in a few days. But God, Derek, even a few hours feels like too long."

"It's not ridiculous," Derek assured him, the intensity in his eyes making Ian believe him, making Ian feel seen in a way he'd never experienced before. "I feel it too. Like I'm losing something I just found. Like someone's taking away something vital." His voice dropped to barely a whisper, raw and vulnerable. "You changed everything for me last night. Everything. And now I have to watch you walk away and pretend I'm okay with it."

He hesitated, fingers tightening around Ian's hand with almost painful pressure, as if the physical connection could somehow bridge the separation they were about to endure.

"I know it's hard to leave right now," he murmured, his voice dropping to that soft, steady tone Ian had already come to crave, the one that felt like safety and home. "But every minute we're apart, I'll be thinking about you. I swear it. You'll be the first thing I think of when I wake up, and the last before I fall asleep." His voice cracked on the last word, betraying the emotion he was trying to contain.

Ian's chest constricted at the quiet certainty in Derek's words; for a moment he couldn't speak, could only nod as tears he could no longer hold back spilled down his cheeks. "I hate this," he managed, his voice breaking. "I hate that I have to leave. I hate that we can't just... God, why does this have to be so hard?"

"And when we see each other again," Derek added, managing a crooked smile that still didn't hide the emotion behind it, didn't hide the way his own eyes had gone shiny with tears, "we'll pick up exactly where we left off. I promise you that. This isn't goodbye, Ian. This is just... intermission."

"Intermission," Ian repeated, the word feeling like a lifeline. "I can do intermission."

But neither of them moved. Neither of them released the other. They sat there, foreheads pressed together, hands clasped, breathing each other's air, neither willing to be the first to break the connection.

Finally, Ian exhaled a long, shuddering breath, his heart dragging like an anchor as he reluctantly began to untangle himself from Derek's embrace. His hand found the door handle, fingers wrapping around the cool metal but hesitating before pulling, lingering for one more moment, one more second of closeness.

"I have to go," Ian whispered, but he still didn't move. "Derek, I have to..."

"I know," Derek said, his hand sliding to the back of Ian's neck, pulling him in for one more kiss—deep and desperate and filled with everything they weren't saying. When they broke apart, both were breathing hard, faces flushed. "Okay. Now go. Before I do something stupid like beg you to stay."

With a dramatic flourish worthy of the theater programs he'd designed—and with hands that shook slightly as he wiped at his wet cheeks—Ian pushed the door open and stepped onto the sidewalk. His legs felt unsteady, as if they'd forgotten their primary function.

"Until we meet again," he declared, unable to keep the theatrical longing from his voice, trying to make light of the ache threatening to swallow him whole.

"You can count on it, beautiful," Derek replied with a wink that somehow managed to be both playful and smoldering despite the redness around his eyes, despite the way his voice wavered. As Ian began to close the door, Derek suddenly called out, "Hold up, Ian!"

Ian paused, one eyebrow raised in question, his hand still on the door. "Yes?"

Derek's face transformed with a million-dollar smile that carved deep dimples into his cheeks—a smile that Ian now knew was reserved just for him, a smile that made his heart stutter.

"Happy-*fucking*-birthday, babe."

Ian's face bloomed with pleasure, his chest expanding with the simple joy of being remembered, of mattering this much to someone. Fresh tears sprang to his eyes—happy ones this time. "Thanks," he replied, the single word carrying the weight of newfound feelings that threatened to overflow. "Best birthday of my life."

As he stepped back from the car, Ian couldn't resist stealing one last, lingering look at the man behind the wheel. Derek offered a small wave, his expression softening momentarily, his other hand pressed against his chest as if trying to hold something inside—before he threw the car into gear. The engine roared to life with renewed vigor, and the Trans Am peeled away from the curb, leaving behind a cloud of exhaust and the echo of squealing tires.

Ian stood frozen on the sidewalk, watching until the car disappeared around a distant corner, his hand raised in a wave that continued long after Derek could no longer see it. It felt as though Derek had taken a vital piece of him along—something essential that Ian hadn't even realized he possessed until it was given away.

His vision blurred with tears as the last glimpse of chrome disappeared from view. He wrapped his arms around himself, trying to hold in the pieces that felt like they were threatening to scatter.

You definitely left something behind, a voice in his head chimed in mischievously. *Your V-card!*

"...and I wouldn't have it any other way," Ian whispered to himself, a grin spreading across his face like sunrise even as tears continued to track down his cheeks—happy and sad all at once, complete and bereft, transformed and somehow more himself than he'd ever been.

*** * ***

Derek kept driving, the morning sun spilling across the hood of the Trans Am, but his eyes couldn't help flicking to the rearview mirror.

Ian was still there—smaller now, framed in the glass—standing in the quiet street like something out of a dream Derek wasn't ready to wake from. Each turn of the wheels carried him farther away, and it felt wrong, like leaving behind a part of himself he hadn't realized was missing until now.

It had never been this hard to say goodbye.

Normally, by this point, his mind would already be calculating how to end things cleanly—how to get the guy out, how to move on.

But Ian?

Ian could stay.

The thought of spending the rest of the day with him—no clocks, no pretending, just that easy laughter and the warmth of his body pressed close tangled in sheets and sunlight—made Derek ache with a hunger that had *nothing* to do with sex.

He told himself they'd see each other soon—the rehearsal dinner, the wedding, all the noise and movement of the coming days—but it didn't help. The ache didn't ease. As he rounded the corner, Ian disappeared from the mirror, and Derek's grip tightened on the wheel.

This feels different, he thought. *He's different.*

And as he turned the corner, losing sight of Ian completely, he realized he'd never wanted anyone—never *needed* anyone—the way he needed him.

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With the Trans Am no longer visible, Ian finally turned toward home, each step a strange mixture of physical soreness from the night's activities and emotional buoyancy that made him feel he might float away if not for the weight of gravity.

But as he walked, the euphoria began to fade, reality seeping in like cold water through cracks.

What am I doing? The thought arrived unbidden, unwelcome. *I just spent the night with my brother's best friend. I lost my virginity to Derek Lawson. I'm in love with—*

He stopped walking abruptly, the realization hitting him with the force of a physical blow.

Oh God. I'm in love with him.

It wasn't just attraction. Wasn't just infatuation or teenage crush or *any* of the other explanations he could hide behind. This was real. This was the kind of love that poets wrote about, that made people do stupid, reckless things.

The kind of love that could destroy everything.

Ian's mind replayed every moment—each touch, each whispered word, each new sensation—in vivid detail, as though cataloging treasures he was terrified of losing. But with each memory came a corresponding wave of anxiety.

What happens when they find out? His pace slowed as the weight of the secret settled on his shoulders. When—not if, when—Mom and Dad discover I'm gay. When they realize I've been lying. When Gavin finds out about Derek and me._

His brother's face floated into his mind—Gavin, who'd been Derek's best friend since childhood. Gavin, whose wedding was supposed to be the happiest moment of his life. Gavin, who Ian was about to betray in the most fundamental way.

He'll hate me_, Ian thought, the certainty of it making his stomach churn. He'll never forgive me. None of them will.

But even as the fear threatened to overwhelm him, even as his rational mind cataloged all the ways this could go catastrophically wrong, Ian couldn't summon even a whisper of regret for the night he'd spent in Derek's arms. For the way Derek had touched him—reverently, carefully, like Ian was something precious. For the way Derek had looked at him like he hung the moon.

I'd do it again, Ian realized with startling clarity. Even knowing what it could cost. Even knowing it might destroy everything. I'd do it all again in a heartbeat._

The thought should have terrified him. Instead, it felt like truth—simple and undeniable.

As he approached the final corner before his street, Ian slipped into what felt like a cheesy spy movie montage. _Mission Impossible: Sneaking In After Curfew_, complete with imaginary, suspenseful soundtrack. He half-expected to see his face on "WANTED" posters taped to light poles.

Focus, he told himself firmly. Get through today. Get through the wedding. Then figure out the rest.

But even as he formulated the plan, Ian knew it was fantasy. There was no "getting through" this. There was only forward—into uncertainty, into truth, into whatever consequences awaited.

Because he couldn't unknow what he'd learned about himself last night. Couldn't unfeel what Derek had made him feel. Couldn't go back to being the Ian who'd existed before—the one who'd hidden and pretended and denied.

That Ian was gone. And there was no resurrection spell for the person you used to be.

When the Mitchell mansion finally came into view—imposing white columns gleaming in the morning sun like judgmental sentinels

—Ian's steps slowed involuntarily. He spotted his parents' cars in the circular driveway, and a stone of dread settled in his stomach, heavy and cold. The perfectly manicured lawn stretched before him like a minefield he had to cross.

Act normal, he coached himself. You're just Ian, coming home from a night at Shawnee's. Nothing happened. You're the same person you've always been.

Except he wasn't. And lying to himself wouldn't change that.

Ian opened the wrought iron gate with excruciating care to prevent its characteristic squeak, then made his way up the long driveway, hyper-aware of every crunch of gravel beneath his sneakers. Before reaching for the front door handle, he discreetly brought the sleeve of his sweater to his nose, inhaling deeply to ensure no trace of Derek's distinctive sandalwood cologne clung to the fabric. Satisfied with his olfactory inspection, he took one deep, fortifying breath and let himself in.

The moment he stepped across the threshold, his mother's voice shattered the morning stillness like a gunshot.

"Ian Mitchell! Where on earth have you been?!" Imogen cried, materializing from the direction of the kitchen, her normally perfectly coiffed blonde hair slightly disheveled from what had clearly been a night of worry. Her voice wasn't just concerned—it was sharp, almost shrill, with an edge of panic that made Ian's stomach drop.

Graham appeared from the living room a heartbeat later, his face a storm cloud of parental concern and disappointment that made Ian's stomach twist with guilt. But there was something else there too—anger, barely contained, making his father's jaw tight and his hands clench at his sides.

"Do you have any idea how worried we've been?" his father demanded, voice tight with barely contained emotion, louder than Ian had heard it in years. "You didn't come home, you didn't call—we called the police, Ian! The police! Do you understand that?"

Ian felt the blood drain from his face. "You... what?"

"We thought something had happened to you!" Imogen's voice cracked, rising with each word. "We called hospitals! Your father wanted to call the FBI!"

"It wasn't quite the FBI," Graham interjected, but his voice was no less severe. "But we did call your friends' parents. All of them. Do you know how that felt? Calling around asking if anyone had seen our son, admitting we had no idea where you were?"

Ian held up his hands in a placating gesture, his mind racing through potential explanations like a game show contestant under pressure, panic making his heart hammer against his ribs. "Whoa there, parents! Before you ground me until I'm eligible for social security, let me explain—"

"Explain?" His father's voice rose to a volume Ian had rarely heard directed at him. "You're going to explain why you let us spend the entire night worrying that you were dead in a ditch somewhere?"

Graham crossed his arms across his chest while Imogen planted her hands firmly on her hips, twin pillars of parental authority awaiting judgment. But there was something different in their stance now—something harder, angrier, more hurt than Ian had ever seen.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," Ian began, words tumbling out with rehearsed contrition, his voice shaking slightly. "I was at Shawnee's and I just... fell into a pizza-induced coma. I woke up covered in pepperoni and regret. Time flies when you're in a carb coma, you know?"

The attempted humor fell flat, landing in the tense atmosphere like a lead balloon.

"Don't," his mother said, her voice suddenly cold in a way that made Ian flinch. "Don't joke about this, Ian. This isn't funny."

Imogen's eyes narrowed to suspicious slits, the maternal radar that had detected untruths since Ian's earliest attempts at deception clearly operational and now set to maximum sensitivity. "You fell asleep? Ian, we called Shawnee's house. Her parents said you weren't there. That you'd never been there. So where were you really?"

Ian's heart plummeted to his stomach, then continued southward to somewhere around his ankles. The lie he'd prepared was crumbling, and he could see in his parents' faces that they knew—not the truth, but that he was hiding something. His mind raced, frantically piecing together a plausible story from the fragments of his original lie.

"Well, I woke up around 5am, then we went to that all-night diner... What's it called? Oh, Bucky's. Then we went to Renee's. That's why Shawnee's parents didn't know where we were. We were moving around, and I just... I lost track of time. I'm sorry. I'm really, truly sorry."

"Lost track of time?" his father repeated, incredulous. "You lost track of an entire *night*? Ian, you're *seventeen* years old, not *seven*. This is completely unacceptable!"

"We raised you better than this," Imogen added, her voice trembling now—not with anger but with hurt that somehow cut deeper. "We raised you to be responsible, to be considerate, to think about how your actions affect *other* people. What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't," Ian admitted, genuine guilt flooding through him, making his eyes sting. "I wasn't thinking. I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't undo a night of terror," Graham said, his voice harsh. "Do you know what went through our minds? Every nightmare scenario—car accidents, kidnapping, assault, murder. We imagined you hurt, scared, calling for us and us not being there. Is that what you wanted? To put us through that?"

"No!" Ian's voice cracked. "Of course not! I just—I made a mistake, okay? I made a stupid mistake and I'm *sorry*!"

He held his breath as Graham and Imogen exchanged a look loaded with silent communication—the mysterious parental telepathy that had seemed magical when he was younger and now felt terrifyingly invasive. Their expressions gradually shifted from anger to relief, though the hurt lingered like smoke after a fire, the tension in their shoulders easing only slightly.

"We were so worried," Imogen said, her voice breaking as she pulled Ian into a tight hug that smelled of her familiar Chanel No. 5 and home and fear not quite faded. She was trembling slightly, and Ian realized with a jolt of shame that she was close to tears. "Don't you ever do that to us again, do you understand? Ever. We thought we'd lost you."

Ian nodded into her shoulder, genuine guilt mingling with relief as his falsehood appeared to have been accepted, though barely. His own eyes burned with unshed tears—partly from the shame of lying, partly from the weight of what he was keeping from them. "I understand. It won't happen again, I promise."

As his parents launched into a well-practiced duet about responsibility and consideration—louder now, more emphatic, his father's voice still carrying the edge of barely-suppressed panic and his mother's eyes still shiny with fear-tears—Ian's thoughts drifted back to Derek like a compass needle finding north.

Regret for worrying his parents created a dull ache behind his ribs, genuine and painful. But even drowning in guilt, even seeing the hurt he'd caused etched in his mother's face and hearing it in his father's raised voice, he couldn't summon even a whisper of remorse for the night he'd spent in Derek's arms... in Derek's bed... with Derek inside him, filling places he hadn't known could be filled.

The memory sent heat rushing to his cheeks and lower regions, creating a distinctly inappropriate physical response given his current situation—being lectured by his increasingly animated parents who had spent the night imagining him dead.

I'm a terrible person, Ian thought, even as his body remembered Derek's touch. *I'm the worst son in the history of sons*.

"All four of your grandparents are here, Ian," his father declared, gesturing toward the living room where, presumably, the elder Mitchells and Bowerses were waiting to witness his public flogging, his voice still carrying that harsh edge. "We woke them. At two in the morning. Because we thought something had happened to you. Your grandmother Bowers was hysterical. Your grandfather Mitchell wanted to organize a search party."

The weight of his deception grew heavier. He'd worried not just his parents but his grandparents too—people who loved him unconditionally, who he'd terrified with his thoughtlessness.

"We agreed to let you go out last night because it was the last day of school," Graham continued, his stern expression slowly, grudgingly giving way to something less severe. "And because we trust you. Or trusted you. I don't know anymore."

"Dad—" Ian started, but his father held up a hand.

"We'll discuss your punishment later," Graham said, his voice still hard but no longer shouting. "For now..." He paused, seeming to struggle with something, before his expression shifted slightly.

"Tonight, we're having a Mitchell family game night extravaganza. And you will be there. You will smile. You will not upset your grandparents further. And you will give us absolutely no reason to worry about you. Understood?"

"Prepare for cutthroat Pictionary and no-holds-barred Outburst," his mother added, her voice still shaky but trying for normalcy. "Last year's Monopoly incident is strictly forbidden from being mentioned. We don't need another board flip situation. Especially not tonight. Not after... not tonight."

The prospect of family game night, which would normally have Ian bouncing with competitive anticipation, now felt like a prison sentence—a performance he'd have to give while his heart was elsewhere. His mind conjured images of his grandparents' notorious competitive streaks, particularly Grandpa Mitchell, whose fiercely contested artistic interpretations had once turned Pictionary into a contact sport.

But more than that, he imagined their faces if they knew. The disappointment. The shock. The potential rejection.

"Great, just what I need," Ian thought as he climbed the stairs to his bedroom sanctuary, his parents' continued lecture following him up the stairs—quieter now but no less impactful. "To be traumatized by Grandma's attempt to draw 'a cucumber' while I'm trying to keep my love life secret and process the guilt of terrifying everyone I love. This should be fun."

The silence from his parents regarding his birthday didn't escape his notice.

Still no 'Happy Birthday, Ian,' he thought with a twinge of hurt as he ascended the carpeted staircase, each step a reminder of how thoroughly Gavin's impending wedding had eclipsed his milestone. And after the night they had because of me, I can't exactly blame them for forgetting.

Ian's mind churned with the logistics of maintaining his fabricated alibi. He'd need to coordinate with both Shawnee and Renee immediately, ensuring their stories aligned if his parents decided to investigate further. The intricacies of deception were already more complicated than he'd anticipated, more tangled than he'd imagined.

As he finally reached his bedroom, Ian collapsed onto his bed with the dramatic flair of a soap opera heroine. He closed his eyes, allowing exhaustion to claim him as thoughts of Derek flooded his consciousness like a broken dam. The phantom sensation of Derek's hands remained imprinted on his skin, the ghost of those perfect lips haunting his own. The memory of Derek's eyes—darkened with desire yet impossibly tender—as he moved inside Ian wrapped around him like a cocoon, temporarily insulating him from the guilt of lying to his parents, from the shame of terrifying them, from the knowledge of how badly he'd hurt them.

He knew greater caution would be necessary moving forward, but in this moment, all he wanted was to luxuriate in the lingering sensations of the previous night. Sleep beckoned, promising dreams filled with Derek's touch, and Ian surrendered willingly to its pull.

Just as he began to drift toward unconsciousness, a soft knock on his bedroom door tugged him back to reality. He sat up reluctantly, rubbing his eyes as he called out, "Come in."

The door creaked open with agonizing slowness, and the tiny figure of his seven-year-old sister, Gwen, peered cautiously around its edge. Her blonde curls had been wrestled into pigtails that stuck out at improbable angles, secured with mismatched butterfly clips—the current style she insisted upon daily with unwavering dedication.

"Gwen... What's wrong?" Ian asked, concern immediately displacing his fatigue as he registered her unusually solemn expression.

She padded into the room on sock-clad feet, stopping a respectful distance from his bed, her small hands clasped before her like a miniature diplomat on a delicate mission. Her eyes, the same clear green as his own, were shadowed with unmistakable sadness.

"Gwen, what is it?" Ian repeated, sitting up fully now, paternal concern flooding his voice despite their mere eleven-year age difference.

"I just wanted to let you know I didn't forget your birthday," she declared with the earnest gravity that only children can muster, her small voice wavering slightly. "I know Mom and Dad did, but I didn't. Happy Birthday, Ian." Her eyes were suspiciously shiny, as if she was fighting tears of her own.

Ian's heart cracked open at her words, emotion rising in his throat like a tide that threatened to drown him. After everything—the lies, the fear he'd caused, the guilt crushing his chest—here was Gwen, seven years old, remembering him when no one else had. He sat up straighter, feeling tears spring unbidden to his eyes, hot and immediate and impossible to stop.

"Thank you, Gwen," he managed, his voice breaking completely, thick with unexpected emotion. "That means..." He couldn't finish, couldn't find words adequate to express what her simple gesture meant in the midst of everything else.

He extended his hand toward his little sister, an invitation she immediately accepted, her small fingers wrapping around his with complete trust. The moment their hands connected, Ian's careful control shattered. A sob he'd been holding back since leaving Derek broke free, then another, his shoulders shaking with the force of emotions he could no longer contain.

"Ian?" Gwen's voice was small, worried. "Why are you crying?"

"Because you're the best sister in the whole world," Ian said through tears, pulling her into a fierce hug, his arms wrapping around her small frame as if she were the only solid thing in a world that had tilted sideways. "Because you're perfect and I love you so much and I don't deserve you."

"You're crying a lot," Gwen observed with the blunt honesty of childhood, her own small arms coming up to hug him back.

"Happy tears," Ian lied, even as the tears were about so many things—Derek, his parents, his secrets, the impossible tangle his life had become, and yes, happiness too, for Gwen and her sweet, uncomplicated love.

He pulled her into a hug, breathing in the scent of strawberry shampoo and the indefinable essence of childhood innocence. She was a constant beacon of unconditional love in his life, her straightforward affection uncomplicated by the expectations and judgments that came with adolescence and adulthood.

"I'm so lucky to have you as my sister," he whispered against her hair, his voice thick with tears, pressing kiss after kiss to the top of her head where one pigtail had already begun to list sideways. "So, so lucky. You know that, right?"

Gwen nodded against his chest, then pulled back from the embrace slightly, her blue eyes—inherited from their father while Ian and their mother shared green—searching his face with unsettling perceptiveness. "Are you okay, Ian? You look really sad. Not just tired-sad. Real-sad."

Ian brushed away tears with the back of his hand, trying to compose himself, but more kept falling. He couldn't seem to stop them now that they'd started. He offered Gwen a smile that felt wobbly and uncertain but was more genuine than any he'd mustered since arriving home. "I'm okay, Gwenny. Just tired from a long night, and overwhelmed by having such an amazing sister. Sometimes people cry when they're too happy, you know?"

Gwen nodded with the profound understanding of someone who accepted emotional truths at face value, her small hand still clasped in his larger one, anchoring him to something real and good and pure. "I made you something for your birthday," she announced, a hint of pride creeping into her voice even as she watched him cry. "It's not much, but I hope you like it. I worked really hard on it."

"I'm sure I'll love it because it's from you," Ian assured her, giving her hand a gentle squeeze, using his free hand to wipe at his streaming eyes. "Can I see?"

Gwen's face transformed with a beaming smile, her earlier solemnity replaced by eager excitement. She reached into the pocket of her floral dress—a garment that clashed spectacularly with her mismatched socks and hair accessories—and extracted a small, slightly crumpled piece of folded construction paper.

Ian accepted the handmade card with exaggerated reverence, carefully unfolding it with hands that shook slightly from the force of his emotions. Inside, he found a stick-figure representation of their family, each member identifiable by crudely rendered but charming details: their father's glasses, their mother's pearl necklace, Gavin's athletic build, and Ian's blond hair—all standing beneath a radiant yellow sun with impossibly long rays. The words "Happy Birthday Ian" were meticulously printed across the top in rainbow-hued crayon, each letter a different color and slightly different size. At the bottom, in Gwen's careful printing, it said "I Love You" with a heart dotted over the 'i' in "Ian."

Genuine emotion welled in his chest as he studied the simple yet profoundly meaningful gift, his tears falling faster now, dropping onto the construction paper and making the crayon colors blur slightly. This small gesture of remembrance felt more significant than any expensive present could ever be.

"Gwen, this is..." His voice broke again. "This is the most beautiful thing anyone has ever given me. Ever. In my whole life."

"Really?" Gwen's face lit up with pure joy. "You really like it?"

"I don't just like it, I love it," Ian said, fresh tears streaming down his face as he pulled her into another crushing hug. "I'm going to keep it forever. I'm going to frame it and look at it every single day. This is the best birthday present I've ever gotten."

"You're still crying," Gwen pointed out, though she seemed pleased rather than concerned now.

"Because you made me so happy I can't contain it," Ian explained, which was partly true. "These are the good kind of tears, Gwenny. The very best kind."

"We can tell mom and dad it's your birthday," Gwen suggested with innocent practicality, her small hand patting his back comfortingly. "They didn't mean to forget. It's Gavin's wedding."

"I know..." Ian acknowledged, a familiar pang of being overshadowed by his brother momentarily resurfacing before he pushed it away. "It's okay, Gwen. Mom and Dad have so much on their minds right now. They had a scary night because of me. Let's not worry them with anything else. I celebrated with my friends last night, and now I

have this beautiful card that my amazing little sister made just for me. This is the best birthday ever."

And in that moment, holding Gwen's card and feeling her small arms around him, Ian meant it. Despite everything—the lies, the secrets, the guilt—he had this. He had Gwen's unconditional love. He had Derek's promise of "intermission, not goodbye." He had himself, finally, truly himself.

It would have to be enough to carry him through what came next.

Gwen's face brightened at his words, pleasure at having successfully accomplished her mission evident in her wide smile. Ian pulled her in for another hug, marveling at her uncomplicated goodness, grateful for this one pure, perfect thing in his increasingly complicated life.

"Thank you, Gwen," he whispered, pressing another kiss to her forehead. "You've made my birthday truly special. You've made everything better."

She squeezed him with surprising strength before springing away, her natural exuberance reasserting itself as she skipped toward the door, childish laughter trailing behind her like scattered musical notes. Ian watched her retreating form with profound affection, a warmth spreading through his chest despite his exhaustion, despite everything.

He carefully placed the handmade card on his nightstand, propping it against his lamp where it would be the first thing he saw upon waking—a reminder of the unconditional love that existed within the complications of family. His fingers traced the crayon letters reverently, a few of his tears still clinging to the paper.

As he settled back onto his bed, Ian allowed tension to drain from his body for the first time since the chaotic morning began. The burden of secrets and worries seemed marginally lighter now, buoyed by Gwen's simple act of remembrance.

Just as his eyelids grew heavy once more, Gwen's head reappeared around the edge of his door, her expression now curious rather than solemn.

"Ian, what's that on your neck?" she asked, guileless interest filling her voice.

Ian's heart performed a gymnastic routine in his chest, hand flying to his neck where his fingers encountered a tender spot he hadn't previously registered. The emotional moment shattered like glass, replaced instantly by pure panic.

"What?" he squeaked, scrambling off the bed and rushing to the mirror mounted on his dresser with the grace of a baby giraffe on roller skates.

There, unmistakable against his pale skin, was a purplish-red mark—a hickey, Derek's unintentional brand of ownership displayed like a neon sign that might as well have been accompanied by flashing arrows and a klaxon.

"Oh no. Oh no no no no no." Ian's voice rose with each repetition, his hands flailing as if he could somehow wave the mark away. "This is not happening. This is NOT happening."

His mind raced at hyperspeed, flipping through possible explanations like a rolodex on fire, each one more absurd than the last. "Oh, this?" he said with forced casualness that sounded strained and slightly hysterical even to his own ears, his voice at least two octaves higher than normal. "It's just a bug bite. I must have gotten it last night at the diner. You know those diners. Very buggy. Extremely buggy. Bug central, really."

Gwen stepped closer, her brow furrowed in concentration as she studied the mark with the intense focus of a tiny scientist conducting peer review. "It doesn't look like a bug bite," she declared with authority beyond her years, tilting her head like a curious puppy. "It looks more like when I tried to curl my hair with Mom's curling iron and burned myself. Remember? And you told me not to tell Mom?"

"YES!" Ian nearly shouted, latching onto the lifeline like a drowning man. "Yes! Exactly! That's exactly what it is! I was—" He frantically tried to think of a plausible reason he'd be using a curling iron on his neck. "—attempting to... style my... neck hair?"

Gwen's face scrunched up in confusion. "You have neck hair?"

"Not anymore!" Ian said with slightly manic cheer. "Because I curled it! Off! With Mom's curling iron! Which I should definitely not have been using unsupervised!"

He forced a laugh that came out strangled and slightly deranged, affectionately tousling Gwen's already disheveled hair to distract her, perhaps a bit too vigorously. "You caught me, Gwenny. I was trying to curl my hair too. Guess I'm not very good at it, huh? Total curling iron disaster over here. Classic Ian move."

Gwen giggled at the absurd image of her brother attempting to style his hair with their mother's beauty tools. "You're silly, Ian," she declared with the confidence of absolute certainty. "Boys don't curl their hair! And definitely not their neck hair!"

"Hey, it's 1995—maybe I wanted to try a new look," Ian protested with exaggerated defensiveness, his voice still a bit too high, guiding Gwen toward the door with gentle but insistent hands on her shoulders. "Maybe neck curls are going to be the next big thing. You don't know. Fashion is unpredictable, Gwenny."

"You're being really weird," Gwen observed with characteristic seven-year-old bluntness.

"That's just how I am now," Ian said, practically shoving her—gently—toward the hallway. "Weird neck-hair-curling Ian. That's me. Living my truth. Listen, can you do me a favor and not mention this to Mom and Dad? I don't want them to know I was messing around with Mom's stuff. They're already mad at me about last night."

Gwen nodded solemnly, delighted to be entrusted with a secret, even if she clearly thought her brother had lost his mind. "I promise!" she vowed with the easy assurance of someone who had yet to learn the complexity of keeping confidences. "But Ian?"

"Yeah?" Ian said, one hand already on the door, ready to close it.

"You should be more careful with the curling iron. That looks like it hurt."

"SO MUCH," Ian agreed emphatically. "The worst. Never again. I've learned my lesson. Natural hair from now on. Au naturel. That's my new motto."

The moment she disappeared down the hallway, Ian slammed the door shut and pressed his back against it, sliding down to sit on the floor as the panic fully set in.

"Okay, okay, okay," he muttered to himself, his hands shaking as he pressed them to his face. "Think, Ian. Think. You need... makeup? A scarf? A turtleneck? In June? 'Oh, just feeling a bit chilly, family, thought I'd wear this lovely wool turtleneck to our indoor game night in the middle of summer, nothing suspicious here!'"

He rushed to the adjoining bathroom, examining the betraying mark more closely in the unforgiving fluorescent light. It was smaller than he'd initially feared but unmistakable against his fair skin—a perfect, Derek-sized love bite that screamed "THIS BOY HAD SEX" to anyone with functioning eyeballs.

"Do I have any makeup?" he asked himself, rummaging through drawers with increasing desperation. "No. Bandaid? Too many questions. 'Oh, I just have a bandaid on my neck, probably had neck surgery, very minor, nothing to see here!' Wait, what about... that fake mustache from last Halloween?"

He paused, holding up the dusty theatrical facial hair, picturing himself at dinner with it adhered to his neck. "Yeah, Ian, just... wear it on your neck. Totally normal. 'Oh this? New fashion trend. Neck mustaches. Very European. You wouldn't understand.'"

He let out a slightly hysterical giggle, tossing the mustache aside. "I'm losing it. I've completely lost it. This is what happens when you lie to your parents and sneak out to lose your virginity. You end up having a nervous breakdown over neck hickies while considering mustache-based camouflage."

Recalling his mother's extensive makeup collection, Ian took several deep breaths to calm himself before slipping stealthily down the

hallway toward the master bedroom, moving with the exaggerated stealth of a cartoon character, pressing himself against walls and peering around corners like he was infiltrating enemy territory rather than just trying to borrow concealer.

He listened for footsteps with the heightened awareness of a cat burglar, his heart pounding so loud he was certain his parents could hear it from downstairs. Finding the coast clear—though he did freeze for a full thirty seconds when the house creaked, certain it was his doom approaching—he eased open the door to his parents' room and made a beeline for his mother's vanity.

He carefully rifled through the various pots and tubes, knocking several over in his haste and fumbling to catch them before they clattered to the floor, finally locating a small container of flesh-toned concealer. "Yes!" he whispered triumphantly, clutching his prize like it was the Holy Grail.

Clutching his prize, Ian returned to his bathroom at a speed somewhere between "casual walk" and "Olympic sprint," where he approached the mirror like a surgeon preparing for a particularly delicate operation.

"Alright, Ian, channel your inner makeup artist," he coached his reflection, dabbing product onto his finger with the concentration of someone defusing a bomb. "Just pretend you're covering up Rudolph's red nose, not evidence of your secret rendezvous with your brother's best friend who gave you the hickey of the century because apparently he's part vampire. No big deal. Totally normal Sunday morning activities."

He applied the concealer with feather-light touches, his hand shaking slightly. "Blend, blend, blend. Like Bob Ross but with more panic and less happy little trees. There are no mistakes, only happy little neck hickeys that could destroy your entire family if discovered.

After several minutes of careful work, constantly checking different angles and lighting, Ian stepped back to examine his handiwork. The hickey was now barely visible to the casual observer, disguised beneath a layer of makeup that—hopefully—looked like natural skin tone and not like he'd plastered his neck with his mother's beauty products.

"There," he said to his reflection with grim satisfaction. "Crisis averted. You look completely normal and not at all like someone who's hiding a sex mark under a pound of concealer. Very natural. Very casual. If anyone asks, it's just your skin. You were born this way. With this exact amount of makeup on your neck."

Studying his handiwork in the mirror, Ian couldn't help but feel a contradictory mixture of relief and something like pride wash over him. The hickey was now barely visible to the casual observer, but knowing it was there—that Derek had left his mark, however

unintentionally—sent a forbidden thrill through his body that completely undermined his panic from moments before.

He touched the concealed spot gently, feeling the slight tenderness beneath the makeup, and smiled despite himself.

"Derek Lawson gave me a hickey," he whispered to his reflection, giddy all over again. "That actually happened. That's real."

He understood intellectually that their relationship carried significant risks, yet the thought of seeing Derek again made those dangers seem inconsequential in comparison to the rewards.

As he slipped back into his bedroom, Ian's mind filled once more with thoughts of Derek—his strength, his tenderness, the way he'd looked at Ian as though he were something precious rather than just Gavin's awkward little brother. Lying on his side, Ian closed his eyes and imagined Derek spooned behind him, strong arms encircling him protectively as sleep finally claimed him.

*** * ***

The shrill ring of the telephone on his nightstand jolted Ian from a dream so vivid he could still feel the heat of Derek's skin against his own. He blinked groggily at his alarm clock, the red digital numbers swimming into focus.

2:17 PM.

He'd been asleep for three hours, yet his body still hummed with pleasant exhaustion. The phone continued its demanding trill as Ian reached for the receiver, voice thick with sleep as he answered, "Hello?"

"It's me," came the familiar baritone that immediately sent blood rushing to Ian's cheeks. His heart performed another complicated gymnastic maneuver in his chest, and he couldn't suppress the smile that overtook his features.

"Derek," he breathed, suddenly wide awake as though someone had replaced his blood with espresso. Just hearing his voice made everything better, made the morning's chaos feel manageable.

There was a moment of weighted silence before Derek spoke again, his voice pitched lower, more intimate. "I can't stop thinking about last night. About this morning. About you standing on that sidewalk, watching me drive away. I had to hear your voice. I kept seeing you in the rearview mirror. It's crazy, but I already missed you. I still miss you."

Ian felt a cascade of emotions flood through him—desire, longing, happiness, and underlying everything, a persistent thread of anxiety. He glanced reflexively toward his closed door, half expecting his parents to materialize and discover his secret through sheer parental intuition.

"I've been thinking about it too," Ian admitted softly, allowing the words to slip past the barricade of caution he'd constructed. "About you. All I've done is think about you. Even while I was getting yelled at, even while I was covering up your hickey, even while my sister was being the only person who remembered my birthday—I was thinking about you."

"God, your birthday," Derek groaned. "I can't believe I didn't get you anything. I'm the worst boyfriend ever."

The casual use of the word made Ian's breath catch. "You gave me *everything*," he said softly. "The best night of my life. That's enough."

"Were your parents hard on you?" Derek asked, concern evident despite the static-filled connection.

"Well, I got more than a lecture," Ian replied with a sigh that carried the weight of the morning's confrontation. His next words tumbled out in a frantic whisper: "They called the police, Derek. They were up all night thinking I was dead. My dad wanted to call the FBI. They called all my friends' parents. I really wish I could just tell them about us, but like, I just know that they'll totally freak out and make it this huge dramatic circus... Especially with Gavin's wedding coming up." He paused, remembering his earlier discovery, trying to lighten the mood. "And by the way, you gave me a hickey. A really obvious one."

"Ian." Derek's voice came through tight, stripped of its usual easy confidence. "Please tell me your dad didn't see your neck this morning."

"Nope," Ian said. "But Gwen did. She pointed it out before I even noticed it myself."

A beat of silence. "Oh God. What did you tell her?"

"I told her I tried to curl my neck hair with Mom's curling iron."

The silence stretched another full second before Derek spoke again, carefully. "You told her... *what*?"

"I panicked! It was the first thing that came into my head!"

Derek exhaled — the long, slow exhale of a man standing down from full alert. "Okay. Okay, that's — you're insane, you know that? Genuinely, certifiably —"

"I had to use my mom's concealer to cover it up. You can hardly tell now."

"Your neck hair," Derek repeated, and Ian could hear it happening — the relief cracking open into something warmer, the laugh building before it arrived. "That's incredible. I'm dating a comedic genius."

Ian felt his cheeks heat. "I mean... I'm not gonna say it was my finest moment."

"It wasn't — but it worked, and that's what matters." Derek's voice settled into something more serious for a moment, warm but

careful. "Ian, listen. We have to be smarter about this. Both of us. Your parents are right down the hall, your brother is getting married in six days, and the last thing either of us needs is your dad piecing things together because I can't keep my mouth to myself." A pause. "Especially that. The hickey was my fault. I got carried away and I shouldn't have — not somewhere that visible. Not while you're still living under their roof. I'm sorry."

"I mean... it's fine," Ian said, and he meant it more than the words suggested.

"It's fine now," Derek said. "But we got lucky. So. Smarter. Deal?"

"Deal."

"Good." And then, because Derek could apparently hold a serious tone for exactly thirty seconds: "Next time I'll aim for somewhere less... visible. How do you feel about belly button hickies?"

"I mean... I'm not gonna say 'no,'" Ian replied, feeling his cheeks heat as he giggled despite himself.

"Consider yourself marked, Ian Mitchell. Even if you have to hide it with concealer and the most unhinged cover story in human history." Derek's laughter finally broke through, deep and genuine and warm enough to fill the tinny phone line completely. "You're like a cherry lollipop — I couldn't resist."

They both dissolved then, the laughter harmonizing across the line until it faded into something softer, something easy. Then Derek's voice dropped to a register that sent shivers down Ian's spine, that made Ian's body remember everything from the night before.

"Well, you belong to me now." Another beat of warm silence followed before Derek continued eagerly, his voice brightening with hope. "So, when can we hang out again? Can you escape your parental prison tonight?"

Ian's rational mind cataloged all the reasons he shouldn't—the risk of discovery, the hurt it would cause his family, the lies already piling up like winter snow, the fact that his parents had spent the night terrified for his safety. But the magnetic pull he felt toward Derek overrode logical considerations with embarrassing ease.

"I'm trapped in family game night purgatory tonight," Ian groaned, throwing his free arm dramatically across the bed. "Four grandparents, cutthroat Pictionary battles and Grandpa Bernard's infamous 'Is that a horse or a submarine?' drawings. Send help... or maybe just a really long extension cord so I can escape out the window." He paused, chewing his lower lip before adding with newfound boldness, "Afterwards, though... later tonight... I could sneak out."

"Please?" The single word from Derek contained multitudes—desire, need, and something that sounded dangerously close to longing. "I know I shouldn't ask. I know you should probably stay home after this

morning. But Ian, I need to see you. I need to hold you. I need to know this morning wasn't goodbye, just... delayed."

Ian's heart clenched at the vulnerability in Derek's voice. "I'll find a way," Ian promised, his voice filled with determination that surprised even himself. "I need to see you too. I don't care about the risks. I don't care about anything except being with you again."

"Be careful, okay?" Derek said, his voice soft with concern. "I don't want you to get in more trouble because of me."

"You're worth it," Ian said simply, and meant it with his entire being.

As Ian returned the phone to its cradle, a heady mixture of anticipation and apprehension settled in his chest like opposite sides of the same coin. He knew sneaking out would elevate the risk exponentially, but the prospect of being in Derek's arms again exerted a gravitational pull he couldn't—and frankly didn't want to—resist. He rose from his bed with renewed energy, mind already calculating the logistics of a midnight escape from the Mitchell family fortress.

Downstairs, Ian discovered his mother in the kitchen, methodically arranging snacks for game night. Her movements were precise, almost balletic in their efficiency as she placed cheese and crackers on the family's cherished serving platter—a wedding gift from his grandmother that had survived three generations of Mitchell gatherings despite two significant chips concealed by strategic food placement.

"Mom?" Ian's voice emerged softer than intended, hesitancy evident in its timbre.

Imogen looked up, her hands momentarily stalling on the platter. Something shifted in her expression as she registered his presence—relief tempering lingering concern, though shadows of the morning's fear still darkened her eyes. "How did you sleep, sweetheart?"

The endearment, so familiar and loving, amplified the weight of his deception. Ian moved closer, drawn by the domestic normalcy of the scene despite his inner turmoil. "Good. I... I'm sorry about last night. Really. I'm so sorry for scaring you and Dad."

His mother's perfectly manicured fingers traced the delicate edge of the platter, a nervous habit he'd observed throughout his childhood, generally during difficult conversations. "You scared us, Ian. Your father and I... we've never known you to be irresponsible like that."

The phrase 'never known you' reverberated in Ian's mind with painful irony.

How much of him did they truly know?

How much had he concealed, even from himself, until Derek had helped him discover it

"I know," he replied, the words tasting inadequate on his tongue. He reached instinctively for a cracker from the artfully arranged

platter, only to have his mother gently swat his hand away—a gesture so quintessentially maternal that it created a knot of emotion in his throat.

"Those are for later," she admonished, though her eyes conveyed more affection than reprimand. "Your grandparents were worried too, you know. They kept saying 'our Ian would never...' Well, it doesn't matter now. You're home safe."

Our Ian.

The phrase hung between them like a question mark illuminated in neon. Ian found himself studying his mother's face—the slight crease between her brows that deepened when she was concerned, the way her lips pressed together when holding back words. He wondered what her expression would become when he finally revealed his truth. Would that crease deepen to a canyon? Would those lips tremble with disappointment or firm with rejection?

Imogen paused in her methodical arrangement of sliced cheeses, her hands hovering over a wedge of aged cheddar like a pianist about to strike a difficult chord. Her next words emerged deliberately, measured like ingredients in one of her precise recipes.

"Ian," she began, attention seemingly fixed on the platter though her focus clearly lay elsewhere, "I need to ask you something." The afternoon light streaming through the kitchen windows caught the silver strands in her blonde hair, making them shimmer as she finally raised her eyes to meet his. "Were you drinking last night?"

The question suspended itself in the air between them, laden with implications. Ian felt his heart stutter, another fabrication forming on his tongue before something in his mother's expression—vulnerable expectation rather than accusatory suspicion—halted the reflexive lie.

"I... had a shot and one drink," he admitted quietly, watching her face for signs of disappointment or anger.

But Imogen's expression remained unexpectedly gentle, almost wistful. She set down the cheese knife with deliberate care, the soft click against the marble countertop punctuating the moment. "It's okay, honey, just make sure you and your friends are safe. I was young once too, you know."

The understanding in her voice created a hollow ache beneath Ian's ribs. If only this minor transgression were the only secret he harbored. She reached out, straightening his collar with maternal instinct—a gesture so achingly normal that it constricted his throat with emotion. Her fingers brushed dangerously close to the concealed mark on his neck, and Ian held his breath, muscles tensing as though preparing for flight.

"Sometimes I forget," she continued, her voice softened by memory, "that you're not my little boy anymore. You're becoming your own person, and that's... that's wonderful and terrifying all at once."

"Mom..." Ian began, the accumulated weight of everything unsaid making his voice thick with suppressed disclosure.

"Just promise me you'll be careful," she requested, her hand moving to cup his cheek in a gesture that had comforted him since earliest childhood. "The world can be..." she paused, searching for appropriate words, "complicated. And I want you to know you can always come to us. About anything."

The sincerity in her voice made Ian's carefully constructed defenses waver like a mirage in desert heat. For one breathless moment, he felt truth pressing against his lips like high tide against a weakening seawall—about Derek, about who he really was beneath the carefully maintained facade of the perfect Mitchell son. But the moment passed, leaving behind the acrid taste of missed opportunity.

"I promise," he said instead, the statement simultaneously true and false. He was being careful, just not in the way she imagined or intended.

From the living room, his father's voice carried through the house as he conversed with the grandparents, its familiar cadence underscored by forced cheerfulness that Ian recognized from countless family gatherings. The sound twisted Ian's stomach into elaborate knots. Every interaction now felt like navigating a minefield blindfolded—seemingly solid ground potentially concealing explosive revelations.

"Mom?" he started again, uncertainty clouding his purpose. Part of him yearned to unburden himself completely—to describe the club, Derek, the transformative night they'd shared, the person he was discovering himself to be. The confession pressed against his teeth like captured birds struggling for release.

But Imogen had already redirected her attention to the task at hand, reaching for another decorative platter. "Would you get the napkins from the dining room, dear? The good ones—your grandmother always notices these things."

Ian swallowed his revelation, nodding in acquiescence. "Sure, Mom."

As he retrieved the napkins—Belgian linen, hand-embroidered, reserved exclusively for special occasions—the late afternoon sun cast elongated shadows across the polished hardwood floors. His mother's cheerful humming had faded, replaced by the gentle percussion of kitchen preparation and the murmur of voices from the living room. Through the arched doorway, he glimpsed his grandparents in their customary positions—Grandpa Mitchell ensconced in the leather armchair that had molded itself to his form over decades, Grandma Bowers arranging her signature almond cookies on a silver plate with mathematical precision.

The tableau was so profoundly familiar, so quintessentially Mitchell, that it created a constriction in Ian's chest composed of

contradictory emotions. These were the moments he'd always cherished—the comfortable choreography of family gatherings, the way each person assumed their assigned role like performers in a well-rehearsed production. But now he felt like an understudy in his own life, reciting lines from a script that no longer aligned with his internal narrative.

The cordless phone in the kitchen seemed to mock him with its presence, the memory of Derek's voice still warm in his ears.

'*Later tonight*', they'd whispered like a covenant. The promise of their reunion thrummed through Ian's veins like electrical current, transforming mundane moments into bearable stepping stones toward their next encounter.

As he helped his mother arrange the platters—"A little to the left, dear. You know how your grandmother is about presentation"—Ian caught a glimpse of his reflection in the kitchen window. He appeared outwardly unchanged, yet he felt fundamentally transformed. Like a photograph developing in reverse, he could see his former self dissolving beneath the person he was becoming—someone both familiar and utterly unknown.

"Ready for game night?" his father's voice boomed from the hallway, warm with genuine anticipation. "I've been practicing my Pictionary skills. This year, no one's going to mistake my giraffe for a telephone pole."

Ian manufactured a smile that balanced genuine affection with carefully crafted normalcy. "Ready as I'll ever be, Dad."

The evening stretched before him like a tightrope—family games, forced normalcy, secrets balanced precariously on the knife-edge of discovery. But beyond it all waited Derek, and the promise of a different kind of truth. For now, Ian would perform his role in this familiar production, all while watching the kitchen clock's hands inch inexorably toward midnight, toward freedom, toward Derek's waiting arms.

Some secrets, he was learning, were worth all the lies they required to protect them.

End of Book One

Read Book Two of
The 18 Candles Trilogy
'In the Still of the Night'

&

Book Three:
'Loud as a Love Song'